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Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

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A New Contest! See page 115

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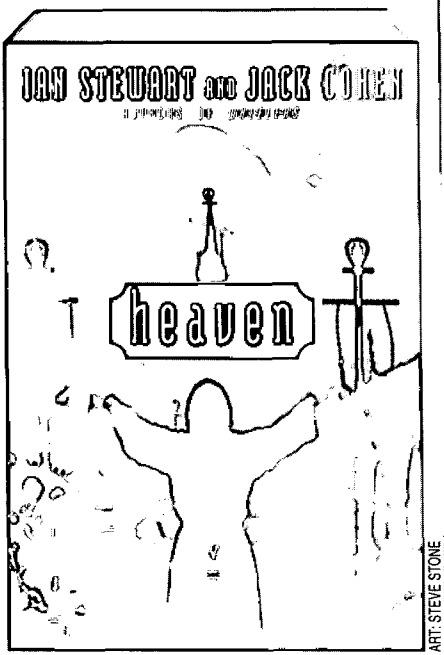

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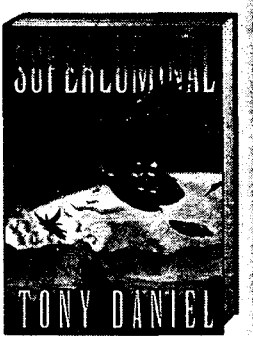

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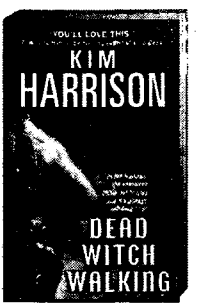

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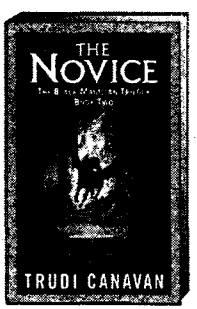

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NOVELETS

A LITTLE LEARNING 5 **Matthew Hughes**
AFTER THE GAUD CHRYSALIS 122 **Charles Coleman Finlay**

SHORT STORIES

ZERO'S TWIN 44 **A. A. Attanasio**
FACES 62 **Joe Haldeman**
THE ZOMBIE PRINCE 75 **Kit Reed**
BY THE LIGHT OF DAY 95 **Arthur Porges**
GLINKY 98 **Ray Vukcevich**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 32 **Charles de Lint**
BOOKS 36 **Robert K.J. Killheffer**
PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: THE FINAL SHUSH! 90 **Paul Di Filippo**
COMING ATTRACTIONS 94
F&SF COMPETITION 115
FILMS: KING ME 116 **Lucius Shepard**
CURIOSITIES 162 **Bud Webster**

CARTOONS: Danny Shanahan (97), S. Harris (121).
COVER BY MAX BERTOLINI FOR "FACES"

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Asimov's magazine was recently embroiled in a small controversy when Ms. Marilyn Becker of Grandville, Michigan, discovered adult situations in the magazine her thirteen-year-old daughter was reading. For her sake, we note here that (a) F&SF *is for adults and (b) the following story contains adult situations. It's also a terrific read, if you ask us, and we look forward to bringing you more stories of Guth Bandar in the noösphere in months ahead. (Your editor, by the way, began reading both* F&SF *and* Asimov's *at the age of thirteen, and has yet to publish anything inappropriate for his inner teen, but of course tastes and standards differ and your mileage will vary.) "A Little Learning" first appeared last year in* Fantasy Readers Wanted—Apply Within, *edited by Nick Aires and James Richey and published by Silver Lake Publishing.*

A Little Learning

By Matthew Hughes

GUTH BANDAR SKIRTED THE fighting around the temple of the war god, took a right turn off the processional way, and descended the cramped, winding street that connected the acropolis with the cattle market. He ignored the shrieks around him and the whiff of acrid smoke stealing up from the lower town, where the invaders were firing houses they had already looted.

After a few paces he found the narrow alley and stepped into its dark confines. The passage led to the blank stone wall of a substantial house where a man in the robes of a prosperous merchant was scraping a hole beneath the masonry. Beside him was a leaden coffer. As Bandar squeezed past, the man finished digging. He opened the box long enough to strip rings from his hands and a chain from his neck and place them within. Polished gold and the glint of gems gleamed in the dim light; then the lid snapped shut.

Bandar paid no heed. The merchant was always here at this point in the cycle. In a moment he would scuttle back to the street, there to be

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caught by a clutch of soldiers, iron swords out and bronze corselets crimson with blood and wine. They would torture the merchant with practiced skill until he led them, weeping and limping, back to the buried hoard. Then they would cut his throat and throw him on the rubbish heaped against the wall at the alley's end.

Now the man stood and turned to go. He passed Bandar as if he were not there, which from the merchant's point of view, he was not. Bandar continued to chant the nine descending tones, followed by three rising notes, which insulated him from the man's perceptions as it did from those of all the idiomatic entities intrinsic to this Event.

The chant was called a thran, one of several dozen specific combinations of sounds which enabled scholars of the Institute of Historical Inquiry, where Bandar was apprenticed, to sojourn among the multitude of archetypal Events, Landscapes, and Situations which constituted the human noösphere — what the laity called the collective unconscious — of Old Earth.

Still chanting, Bandar climbed the stinking heap at the end of the alley. At its apex would lie a large amphora with a fractured handle. He would seize the amphora, prop it against the wall, then mount and scramble atop the barrier. There he would chant a new thran, opening the gate to the next-to-last stage of the test: a Landscape preserving an antique time when the world was mostly forest.

The apprentice had already made his way by rocket-tube and teeming public slideways across the world-girdling City of a hyperindustrialized global state that flourished and faded eons before, taken a short detour through an insidious alien invasion — it had failed — and traversed a rift valley where early human variants competed to determine whose gene pools would dry to dust in the evolutionary Sun. Now a walk in the forest and a segue into one of the Blessed Isles would see his quest completed.

But when he reached the top of the refuse heap, he found the great urn smashed to fragments. That ought to have been impossible, Bandar knew; nothing changed in the noösphere. Events and Situations repeated themselves exactly and eternally.

There was only one possible explanation: Didrick Gabbris had already passed this way, climbed on the amphora and departed. But before doing so he had contrived to destroy the vital stepping-stone.

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Frantic, Bandar scoured the area, digging through the rubbish in hope of finding something of sufficient size and sturdiness to take his weight. But if there had been anything useful, Gabbris had removed it.

Bandar was left with three choices. His first option was to search the City and bring back something else to climb on. But his insulation from the idiomats' perceptions would not extend to a substantial object that was inherent to the Location. And the longer he interacted closely with the substance of the Location, the more risk that the thran's effect would weaken and he might be perceived.

Suppose some brutal soldier, startled as a chair was borne along by a vague, misty figure, thrust his spear into the mist. Bandar's corpse would thence forward be a permanent feature of the Sack of the City. His tutors had warned of the risks of "dying" in an Event. The sojourner's consciousness became bound to the Location, reforming as one of the idiomatic entities and forever "living" and "dying" as the cycle played out endlessly.

His corporeal body, seated cross-legged on a pad in the examinations room at the Institute, would remain comatose. It would be transferred to the infirmary, bedded and intubated, and consigned to a slow decline.

Bandar's second option was to find an out-of-the-way corner and remain there until the Event concluded and began anew. Then, when he came back to the rubbish heap, the amphora would be waiting for him. But that would take time — too much time, even though durations in the noösphere did not run at the same speed as in the phenomenal world.

Different sites had their own internal clocks. This Event ran far slower than reality; the few hours in which he waited out the cycle would be almost a day in the examination room. Bandar would be the last apprentice to complete the quest; he could abandon all hope of winning the Colquhoon Bursary and being admitted to the advanced collegia.

Which was exactly why Didrick Gabbris had smashed the urn. Gabbris would win the bursary. Gabbris would scale the academic heights, while Guth Bandar slunk back to his family's commerciant firm, to spend his life buying and selling and fretting over the margins between the two.

His third option was no help: He could intone a specific thran and a ripple would appear in the virtual air. He would step through the emergency exit and instantly plunge back into his own seated body. He might

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complain to the Institute's provost about Gabbris's perfidy, but by the time a board could be convened to investigate, the Event would have recycled and all evidence of the crime would have disappeared.

Glumly, Bandar weighed his options and decided to risk searching for a step-up. But as he started down the pile of refuse there was a commotion at the mouth of the alley and three soldiers appeared, pushing the merchant before them. They watched as he knelt and dug up the box, amid coarse jokes and pokes with a sword at the man's plump buttocks.

There was nothing Bandar could do. The way was too narrow for him to pass, even unseen. He must sit on the rubbish heap and sing the thran, waiting while the soldiers gloated over the treasure, argued over its division, then cut the merchant's throat and finally departed.

There would be no time to find something to step on. Sadly Bandar waited for the blood to spurt and the soldiers to leave. He would open a gate and return to the examination room. Perhaps his story would be believed and he would be given a make-up exam. But that was a faint hope; he could imagine the conversation.

Bandar would say, "I accuse Didrick Gabbris of malfeasance in the matter of the amphora."

Gabbris would not deign to sully a glance by directing it at Bandar. He would elevate his nose and say, "Words without substance fleetly fly but seldom stick. Bring forth your evidence."

"I have none but my character."

"Your character is a subjective quality. You perhaps measure it as large and splendorous, while others might call it mean and marred by envy."

"This is injustice!"

"Again, a subjective concept, while blunt facts resist manipulation. Failure must find no favor."

Senior Tutor Eldred would tug at his sparse side whiskers and make his disposition. He would be swayed by the force of Gabbris's views. Bandar's would seem the squeakings of some timorous creature.

The pathetic scene at the foot of the refuse heap was nearing its conclusion. The merchant said, as always, "There, you have taken all that I valued."

One of the soldiers drew a dirk. "Not quite all."

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The merchant trembled. "My life is of no worth to you. Though you take it from me you cannot carry it away with you."

"Yet we are inclined to be thorough," said the invader.

Bandar waited. He thought of some of the Locations he had visited during his years at the Institute, the places he would miss. It was then, as he said goodbye to some of his favorites, that it occurred to him that he had a fourth option.

The Institute had issued the examination candidates a partial map of the noösphere, showing only the Locations they would need to navigate the test course. The full chart of humanity's collective unconscious was an intricately convoluted sphere, complexity upon complexity. It was the work of thousands of years of exploration by noönauts, many of whom had been absorbed by perils lurking in dark corners of the Commons.

Bandar did not have such a map. A noönaut could take on his journey only what he could hold in his memory, and to encompass the schematic representation of an organic realm that had been evolving for eons was itself a work of years.

But there was a physical representation of the full map in the communal study chamber and Bandar had spent many hours gazing into its labyrinthine depths. He could not reify it fully like a master, so that it would appear to hang in the air before him, twisting and rotating to display its maze of lines and spheres. But he could recall large parts of it, all of the major Landscapes, most of the first-order Situations and more than a few of the significant Events.

The more he thought of it, the clearer grew his recollection of the map. He saw connections and linkages from this Event to a Landscape and from there to a Location from which he knew three paths radiated. In his mind's eye he could plot a route that would let him navigate to the test's final Location, a prototypical island paradise, where Eldred waited for the candidates to arrive.

It was just possible that Bandar could indeed find his way home. Better yet, he was fairly sure that some of the sites through which he would travel had advantageous temporal dimensions: the alternate route, though it required more steps, might actually be traversed in less objective time than the course the tutors had set.

The merchant had gurgled out his last bloody breath. The alley lay

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empty. Bandar made up his mind to try the long way home. Perhaps his resourcefulness would so impress the examiners that they would overlook his failure to follow the prescribed course. At the worst, if hopelessly stuck, he could exit through open an emergency gate.

He risks nothing who has lost all, he told himself. Singing the thran, he returned to the processional way and followed it past the burning royal palace to the city's shattered gates. Dead defenders were piled high and he had to climb a rampart of bodies to reach the wooden bridge that spanned the canal.

A little beyond was a stand of date trees. A single attacker, pinned to a trunk by an arrow through his shoulder, weakly struggled to work the head free of the wood. His eyes widened when Bandar ceased intoning the insulating thran and suddenly appeared before him.

"Have you come to help me?" the soldier said, indicating the shaft through his flesh. "You do not resemble the god I prayed to."

"No," said Bandar. It was unwise to feel emotions, critical or supportive, in response to the idiomatic entities. They were not, after all, real people; they were more like characters in stories, no more than a collection of necessary attributes. The wounded soldier was probably a version of Unrequited Faith; to pull the arrow free would contradict his role in the Event and could cause the entity to act disharmoniously.

Bandar faced the space between two of the date palms and sang five notes. A wavering vertical fissure divided the air. He stepped through.

A GUST OF WIND threw stinging sleet into his face. He was in a world of black and white and gray, standing on glacial scree that sloped down from a bare ridge above and behind him. The closest thing to color was the dark blue of mountains whose lower slopes were visible beyond the ridge until they rose to disappear above the leaden overcast from which the sleet was flying. If the wet clouds dispersed, they would reveal no peaks; the tops of the mountains were buried in unbroken ice all the way to the pole.

Downslope, a cold, wet plain of lichen and coarse grass extended to a line of horizon that was largely invisible behind the showers of freezing rain. Far out he saw a mass of reindeer and the humped shapes of mammoths, identifiable by their peculiar bobbing gait. Closer, a ring of

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musk oxen turned curved horns toward a short-muzzled bear that circled the herd on long legs.

Good, thought Bandar. He recognized the scene. He had visited this Location before though not at these precise coordinates. Still, the connecting node that would admit him to the next site was near, in a narrow cave set back from a ledge that must be farther up the ridge. He strove to remember how the view before him had looked from that previous vantage. He had definitely been higher up and somewhere off to his right.

The experienced noönaut developed a feel for these things. Though he could not call himself experienced, Bandar could perform the exercise that enhanced his sense of direction. After a moment, he experienced a tiny inclination to go to his right. He let his will yield to it and the predilection grew stronger.

That's that, he told himself and turned in the direction. A motion from the corner of his eye caught his attention. The snub-faced bear was loping toward him across the flatland, broad paws flicking up spray from the wet lichen. It was almost to the bottom of the slope.

Bandar swiftly sang the thran of nine and three notes which had sequestered him in the sacked city. The bear's pace did not slacken and its small black eyes remained fixed upon him. Quickly, the noönaut intoned the seven and four, the second most common insulating thran.

The bear reached the base of the scree and began to climb. He could see its condensed breath smoking from its gaping mouth, its lolling tongue bright pink against its brown fur.

There were three other thrans Bandar could try. He suspected now that the oldest and simplest of them, the four and two, would insulate him from the idiomatic bear's perceptions. But if he was wrong, there would not be time to determine which of the other two would work. The bear had increased its speed, ears flattened against its broad head. It would be on him in seconds.

Bandar sang five tones and the air rippled behind him. He flung himself through the gap and tumbled to the ground in the date grove. The Event was still unwinding and the wounded soldier remained pinned to his tree. The man blinked at him but Bandar counted slowly to ten then sang the five tones once more. He stepped through the fissure.

As he had expected, much more time had passed in the ice world and

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it had recycled. The Landscape was as it had been the first time he had stood on the slope, the bear stalking the musk oxen out on the plain. Bandar saw it become aware of him, saw it turn toward him and take its first step. He sang the four and two; instantly the predator turned back to the herd.

Chanting the tones, the noönaut faced about and began to climb. The loose gravel rattled out from under each footstep, so that he slid back half a step for each one he took. The icy rain assaulted the weather side of his face and neck and his extremities were numb. Bandar paused and, continuing the thran, applied another of the adept's exercises: thick garments grew to replace the nondescript garb in which he had imagined himself when he entered the noösphere. Warm mittens and heavy boots covered his hands and feet, and a fur-lined hood encased his head. For good measure, he imagined himself a staff. The climbing went better after that.

The top of the ridge was broad and only slightly curved. He made good time with the wind at his back, and within a few minutes he saw the ledge jutting out of the scree. But when he scrabbled down from the ridgetop he was surprised to find several fissures and cracks in the rock.

He turned and looked out at the plain again. He was sure this was the spot his tutor had brought them to, but the class had been warned not to venture out of the recess, presumably because of the bear. They had only looked out through the narrow opening, to fix the scene in memory, then attended as the tutor had revealed the two nodes and sung the thran that activated both.

Bandar looked into the first fissure and rejected it as too scant in both width and height. The second was no better. The third looked promising, however. The opening was the right height and the darkness beyond promised that the cave was also deep enough. Throwing back his hood, he stepped within.

The gates would be to his right, and Bandar turned that way. Thus he did not at first notice the bulky shape squatting in the rear of the cavern holding her sausage-fingered hands to the tiny warmth of a grease lamp burning in the severed cranium of a cave bear's skull. He drew breath to sing the four and two but before a sound could emerge a noose of plaited rawhide dropped over his head and constricted his throat.

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The Commons was the distillation of all human experience, everything that had ever been important to humankind, individually or collectively, since the dawntime. It was the composite memory of the species, the realm of the archetypes. Some were of great moment, battles and disasters; some were the small but vital elements of a full life, the loss of virginity, the birth of a child; some were simply landscapes — deserts, sea coasts, lush valleys, ice age barrens — against which generation upon generation of humans had measured their existence.

The elements of the noösphere were formed by aggregation. An event happened, and the person to whom it happened remembered it. That individual memory was the smallest particle of the noösphere, called by scholars an engrammatic cell. On its own, a single cell drifted away on the currents of the Commons and was lost.

But when the same event — or even closely similar events — happened to a multitude, the individual cells were so alike that they cohered and joined, drawing vitality from each other, and forming a corpuscle. As a corpuscle grew it became more potent, more active, even to the extent of absorbing other similar corpuscles. Enough such adhesions and corpuscles aggregated into archetypal entities, permanent features of the collective unconscious. They took up specific Locations in the Commons.

Events, Situations, and Landscapes were not precise nor accurate records. Rather they were composite impressions of what similar happenings had *meant* to those to whom they happened. They included every horrid crime and tragic defeat, every joy and triumph of the human experience, real or imagined, each distilled to its essence and compounded.

And all of those essential Events, Situations, and Landscapes were peopled by appropriate idiomatic entities, like the mammoths on the sleet-swept plain, the tortured merchant in the burning city, and the immensely fat female cave dweller whose piglike eyes now regarded Guth Bandar from the rear of the cave, while whoever was behind him jerked the noose, leaving him dancing on tiptoe, struggling to breathe.

The fat one grunted something and another figure appeared from behind her bulk. This one was as lean and dried as the rawhide that

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constricted Bandar's throat, with a face that was collapsed in on itself and wrinkled up like dried fruit, framed by thin white hair clotted together by rancid oils. She poked a wisp of wool into the grease lamp to make a second wick, then lifted the skullcap and crossed the cave to hold it before Bandar's face.

She peered at him from rheumy eyes, toothless gums working and lips smacking loudly. Then the hand that was not encumbered by the lamp reached under his parka and worked its way into his leggings. She seized parts of Bandar that he would have rather she had left untouched, weighing them in her dry, hard palm. Then she made a noise in her throat that expressed disappointment coupled to resignation and spoke to the unseen strangler behind him.

"Ready him."

The noose about his throat loosened but before Bandar could gain enough breath to sing the thran a hood of grimy leather descended over his head. The noose was slipped up over the ill-smelling hide until it came level with his mouth. Then it was cinched tight again, gagging him. He tried to intone the thran but could not produce enough volume. Meanwhile, his hands were bound together behind him.

There were eye holes in the hood and a slit where his nose protruded, allowing him to breathe. He felt a weight on his head and realized that the headgear supported a pair of antlers.

The strong one who had held him from behind now stepped into view and he saw that she too was female, though young and muscular, with a mane of tawny hair and a face that mingled beauty with brute power.

She moved lithely to hitch a hide curtain to a wooden frame around the cave's mouth, closing out the light and the cold air that flowed in like liquid from the tundra. The old one was dipping more wicks of what was probably mammoth wool into the grease lamp, creating a yellowy glow on the walls, while the fat one began to strip off her furs and leathers.

It was an ancient maxim at the Institute that a little learning made a perilous possession. Bandar realized that aphorism defined his predicament. He had been brought to this Location once before, but barely long enough to fix the place in his memory. He had misjudged its category.

When they had briefly visited an adjacent cave the tutor's sole concern had been to display the nodes that coincided there. He had not

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explained the Location's nature, and when Bandar had looked out at the tundra he had thought that they were briefly passing through a mere Landscape; instead, it was now clear that this was a Situation.

In the dawntime, there had been an archetypal tale of three women — one young, one old, one in the prime of life — living in some remote spot. Questers came to them, seeking wisdom and always paying an uncomfortable price. In later ages the Situation had evolved into bawdy jokes about farmers' daughters or poetic tropes about dancing graces. But here was the raw base, rooted deep in humankind's darkest earth. Bandar had no doubt that the final outcome of this Situation, as with so many others, was blood and death.

The grease fire was warming the cave as the crone and the girl efficiently rendered Bandar naked. The matron, now also uncovered, grunted and sprawled back on the pile of furs, giving Bandar more than an inkling of the first installment of the price he must pay.

The young one took a gobbet of the grease that fed the lamp and warmed it between her hands before applying it to the part of Bandar that the crone had weighed and found merely adequate. Despite Bandar's disinclination to participate, her ministrations began to have an effect.

Bandar realized that he was in danger of being pulled into this Situation, deeply and perhaps irrevocably. The longer one stayed in a particular place and interacted with its elements, the more its "reality" grew and the more integrated with it the sojourner could become. The speed of the effect was heightened if the noönaut abstained from intoning thrans or if he adopted a passive attitude.

The old hag was shaking a bone rattle and grunting a salacious chant about a stag and a doe. Meanwhile, the young one had finished greasing him and was surveying the result with a critical eye. Bandar looked down and saw that his virtual body was behaving as if it were real flesh. It was a worrisome sign.

Act, do not react was the rule in such a predicament. But outnumbered, bound and gagged, he had few options for setting the agenda. He mentally cast about for inspiration and found it in the expression on the face of the youngest of the three cave dwellers. She was regarding what was now Bandar's most prominent feature in a manner that more than hinted at disappointment.

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Her look gave the noönaut a desperate idea: if it was possible to grow winter clothing and to create a staff from nothing, might he likewise be able to change the proportions of his own shape? His tutors had never spoken of such a thing, but necessity was a sharp spur. If it was possible for Bandar to increase the dimensions of his most intimate equipment, he might improve his position.

While the young one reapplied herself to his lubrication, Bandar employed the adept's exercises that had protected him against sleet and slippery footing, although now with a more personal focus. After a few moments he heard the rattle and chant stop. The crone was staring, open-mouthed, and the tawny haired one was blinking with surprise. Bandar looked down and saw that his efforts had been more successful than intended. What had before been merely presentable was now grown prodigious.

"That will need more grease," the old woman cackled. The young one agreed and scooped up a double handful.

When he was thoroughly lubricated, they manhandled him over to where the fat one lay in expectation. He was forced first to kneel between her enormous splayed thighs, then to lie prone upon the mountainous belly. The crone took hold of his new-grown immensity and guided him until connections were established, which brought first a grunt of surprise from the matron, then other noises as the young one placed a cold, calloused foot on Bandar's buttocks and rhythmically impelled him to his labors.

The woman beneath him began to thrash about, making sounds that put Bandar in mind of a large musical owl. For his part, he concentrated on mental exercises that placed a certain distance between his awareness and his virtual body, lest he become too involved in the activity and find himself on a slippery slope into full absorption.

Seize the process or be seized by it, he remembered a tutor saying. The Commons was an arena rife with conflict, where will was paramount. To control his place in a Location, the uninsulated noönaut must be the dominant actor, not one of the supporting cast. *How can I amplify my impact*? he asked himself, rejecting any further increase in size — he might damage the matron.

The idea, when it came, seemed unlikely to succeed. Still, he had

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heard that women could grow fond of certain devices used for intimate achievements. Bandar summoned his conviction and focused his attention on effecting the change. Within seconds a new sound rose above the matron's musical hoots: a deep thrumming and throbbing which he could clearly hear despite the fact that its source was buried in the mounds of flesh beneath him.

The matron now began to issue throaty moans with a counterpoint of high-pitched keening. She thrashed about with an energy that might have propelled Bandar from her if the young one hadn't continued to press down with her pumping foot. At last the heaves and flings culminated in a final paroxysm and Bandar heard a long and satiated sigh, followed almost at once by a rumbling snore.

Immediately, the other two hauled the noönaut from the matron's crevice and flung him down on his back, the vibrating immensity buzzing and humming above his belly. There was a brief tussle between youth and old age, quickly decided by the former's strength despite the latter's viciousness and guile.

The tawny-haired woman straddled Bandar and seized his conspicuous attribute. As she lowered herself onto it her eyes and mouth widened and tremors afflicted her belly and the long muscles of her thighs. Then she leaned forward, placed her palms on his shoulders and set to work.

Bandar saw the crone peering over the young one's shoulder with an expression that sent a chill of apprehension through him. Ritual slaughter might not be the worst fate he would suffer. He resolved to exert himself.

He reasoned that the same exercises that had enlarged some parts of him must make others shrink. While the young female lathered herself to a fine foaming frenzy above him, Bandar focused his attention on his still bound hands. In a moment he felt them dwindle until they were the size of a doll's. The rawhide thongs slipped off.

The young woman was quicker to reach the heights than her older cavemate but stayed there longer. Bandar bided his time. Finally, she emitted a long and thoughtful moan and collapsed onto the noönaut's chest. The old woman wasted no time but avidly seized the incumbent at hip and shoulder and rolled her free of Bandar. She stepped over him and prepared to impale herself.

Bandar bent himself at knee and hip to put his feet in the crone's belly,

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then launched her up and away. As she squawked in pain and outrage, he sprang to his feet and made straight for the hide that hid the exit.

His tiny hands gave him trouble, but when a glance behind showed his two conquests sitting up and the hag reaching for a long black shard of razor-edged flint, he put an arm between wood and leather and tore the covering away.

The sleet slashed at him. The bare ledge was slick with freezing rain. There was another cave a short dash along the ledge — it looked to be the right one — and he half-ran, half-slid toward it, the antler-topped mask bobbing on his head and his still enormous and buzzing bowsprit pointing the way.

As he went he tried to loosen the cord that pressed the mask into his mouth, but his puny hands hindered him. Yet he must free himself of the mask to chant the thran that opened the gate in the next cave or be caught by the pursuing women.

He decided to shrink his head. There was no time for refinement and he did not try to specify the degree to which his skull must diminish; he could put things to rights later.

As he ran he felt the mask loosen, then the cord dropped loose around his neck as the dimensions of his jaw diminished. He tossed his chin up and the antlered hood flew backward. From behind him he heard a grunt and a curse and a clatter. Someone had tripped over it and they had all fallen.

Bandar did not look back but threw himself into the new cave, which he was relieved to see was empty. He recognized it now, though he could not recall whether the gate he sought was to left or right.

If he had time, his memory or his noönaut's acquired sense of direction would tell him which to choose. But there was no time. He could not even intone the four and two thran and remove himself from his pursuers' purview: Having spent so long uncloaked in this Situation and so closely involved with its idiomats, he could not hide himself completely.

The moment he entered the cave he chanted the opening thran. Nothing happened. Then the cave darkened as the doorway behind him filled with murderous females. Bandar had no time to work out why the thran had not succeeded. Fortunately, the answer came before full panic

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set in: He had sung the notes through vocal equipment that was markedly smaller than his regular issue; just as a miniature horn plays a higher note, his shrunken larynx and throat had thrust the thran into a higher register. Thrans had to be exactly the right pitch.

Bandar adjusted for scale and sang the notes again, and was rewarded with two ripples in the air. Arbitrarily he chose the one to his left and leapt through as the young cavewoman's nails sank into his shoulder.

HE EMERGED into Heaven. All was perfection: verdant meadows with grass soft as velvet and dotted with flowers of exquisite filigree; groves of stately trees, each impeccable in composition and form; skies as clear and blue as an infant's gaze; and air as sweet as a goddess's breath.

The rift through which he had come closed behind him and Bandar stood a moment, a tiny hand to his breast as his fear ebbed away. At once he knew that he had taken the wrong gate — he should now be alone on a mountaintop from which he could have segued to the destination island.

He could retrace his route. The cavewomen's Situation would soon recycle. But first he should restore his body parts to their proper proportions and reclothe himself. He needed to make tones of the right pitch, and it would not do to encounter the Senior Tutor while stark naked and presenting the humming enormity that dominated his ventral view.

He looked around carefully. He was standing under some trees. There were no idiomatic entities in view and Heaven was usually a tranquil Location. But just to be safe he decided to move deeper into cover. He ducked to pass under the lower branches of a flawless flowering tree, the perfume of its blossoms at close range making his head swim. With each step the touch of the grass against his bare feet was a caress.

A very sensuous Heaven, he thought, and resolved to explore it more thoroughly when he was received into the Institute as a full fellow. Perhaps he would make a special study of such Locations; it would be pleasant work.

Secluded among the scent-laden trees, he concentrated on a mental image of his own head and performed the appropriate exercises for what he judged to be sufficient time. But when he raised his miniature hands to examine the results he discovered that his skull had remained tiny while

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his ears and nose had grown far beyond normal; indeed they were now as out of harmony with nature as the buzzing, vibrating tower that rose from his lower belly.

If I could see what I am doing, it would make the work much easier, Bandar reasoned. The setting seemed too arcadian for an actual mirror, but the noönaut heard the gentle tinkling of water nearby. *A still pool would do,* he thought.

He followed the sound deeper into the grove and came to a clearing where a bubbling spring welled up to form a pool of limpid clarity. He knelt and gazed into the gently rippling water. The image of his shrunken face, albeit now centered by a trunk-like proboscis and framed by a pair of sail-like ears, looked back at him with grave concern. He began the exercises anew.

"Bless you," said a mellow voice behind him. Bandar swung around to find a sprightly old man with the face of a cherub beaming down on him from under a high and ornate miter that was surrounded by a disk of golden light. The saint was dressed in ecclesiastical robes of brilliant white with arcane symbols woven in gold and silver thread. In his hand was a stout staff topped by a great faceted jewel.

"Thank you," said Bandar. "I'll be but a moment."

But as he spoke he saw the man's beatific expression mutate sharply to a look of horror succeeded by a mask of righteous outrage. Faster than Bandar would have credited, the jewel-topped staff rotated in the hierophant's hand so that it could be thrust against the noönaut's chest, and he was toppled into the crystal water.

"Glub," said Bandar as he passed below the surface. When he struggled back to the air he saw the old man looming over him, the staff set to do fresh mayhem. He had time to hear the idiomat cry out, "Enemy! An enemy is here!" before the gem struck Bandar solidly on his tiny cranium and drove him under again.

Bandar wondered if it was possible to drown in the Commons. He elected not to find out and kicked off toward the other side of the pool, swimming under the surface.

The throbbing queller of cavewomen was not diminished by the cold water. Indeed it tended to dig into the soft bottom of the pool so that he had to swim closer to the surface. But his action took him out of range of

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the staff and in moments he had hauled himself free of the water. The idiomatic saint was circling the pool, clearly intent on doing more damage, all the while bellowing alarms.

Bandar fled for the trees, but as he ran he heard the rush of very large wings. Casting a look over his shoulder, he saw a vast and shining figure passing through the air above the grove. The long-bladed sword in its grasp was wreathed in flame and the look on its perfectly formed features bespoke holy violence.

Bandar fell to his knees and opened his mouth. The four and two would not work here, he was sure. And he doubted the nine and three would be efficacious. Given how his fortunes had fared today, it would be the three threes. This was the most difficult sequence of tones, even when the chanter was not possessed of mouse-sized vocal equipment absurdly coupled to an elephantine nasal amplification box, while distracted by vibrations from below and the threat of incineration from above.

His alternatives rapidly dwindling, the noönaut frantically adjusted his vocalizations to find the exact pitch. At least the giant ears assisted in letting him hear exactly how he sounded. The sight of the descending winged avenger lent urgency to his efforts and in moments he struck the right tones. He sang the three threes and saw the terrible beauty of the angel's face lose its intensity of focus. The wings spread wide to check its ascent; it wheeled and flew off, its flaming sword hissing.

The staff-wielding hierophant stood on the other side of the bubbling pool, scratching his head and wearing an expression like that of a man who has walked into a room and cannot remember what he came for. Then he turned and went back the way he had come.

The gate back to the ice-world was too close to where the saint was keeping his vigil. Bandar did not fancy hunting for it and standing exposed while seeking the right pitch for the opening thran, with hard-tipped staffs and flaming swords in the offing. He would find another gate and take his chances.

Chanting the three threes, he went out onto the luxurious lawn again but now its caressing touch mocked his dismay. He saw above the distant horizon a squadron of winged beings on combat patrol. In another direction was a walled citadel, giant figures watching from its ramparts, a glowing symbol hovering in the sky over the heads.

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There could be no doubt: He had passed into one of those Heavens that offered no happy-ever-aftering; instead, here was an active Event — one of those paradises threatened by powers that piled mountains atop each other or crossed bridges formed of razors. In such a place an uninsulated sojourner would not long remain unnoticed. And neither side took prisoners.

If he stopped chanting the three threes, someone might launch a thunderbolt at him. Still, Bandar attempted the techniques that would restore his parts to their proper size. At the very least, he wished to be rid of the humming monstrosity connected to his groin; it slapped his chest when he walked and when he stood still it impinged upon his concentration.

But it was too difficult to maintain the complex chant through his distorted vocal equipment while attempting to rectify his parts. All Bandar could manage was to alter the color of the buzzing tower from its natural shade to a bright crimson. It did not seem a profitable change.

He abandoned the effort and concentrated instead on using his sense of direction to tell him where the next gate might be. In a moment an inkling came, but he was dismayed to recognize that the frailty of the signal meant that the node was a good way off.

Bandar set off in that direction, chanting the three threes, ears flapping from fore to aft and nose swaying from side to side, his chest slapped contrapuntally. After he had walked for some time he noticed that the signal was only marginally stronger; it would be some time before he reached its source.

While I was making alterations I should have doubled the length of my legs, he thought and scarcely had the idea struck him than he realized if he had had that inspiration in the sacked city he could have climbed onto the wall to open its gate and none of this would have been necessary.

The noönaut stopped and sat down. *I have been a fool*, he thought. *Didrick Gabbris deserves to win; he will fit this place far better than I ever could*. He felt his spirit deflate and resolved not to persist with the quest. He would open an emergency gate and leave the Commons.

But not here in the open, where someone might cast who knew what lethal missile in his direction. Without warning, in such a Location, an actual god might appear and unleash disasters that only an irate deity could conceive of.

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Bandar rose and crossed quickly to the nearest copse of trees. Under their sheltering boughs he spied a troop of armored figures drawn up in a phalanx, the air above their head a blaze of gold from their commingled halos. Still chanting, he backed away.

He walked on, investigating one stand of trees after another, finding each under the eye of at least one brightly topped sentry. Several were peopled by whole battalions of holy warriors.

He would have to leave Heaven before he could find a safe place in which to call up an emergency exit. He wished he knew more about these Locations — his interests ran more toward the historical than the mythological — but he recalled that there was often a ladder or staircase connecting them to the world beneath. It was usually at the edge, sometimes wreathed in clouds.

He kept on until eventually he found himself descending a long, grassy slope which seemed to end in a precipice. Gingerly, he inched toward the edge. He would have crawled on hands and knees but his enormous red appendage hampered him.

Near the lip he looked out into empty air that was suffused with light from no discernible source. Far below, scattered clouds drifted idly, the gaps between them allowing glimpses of fields and forests beneath. Bandar shuffled closer to the edge to look almost directly down, hoping to see some means of descent, but his view was hindered by the vibrating enormity. Finally he knelt and leaned forward.

There was something there, just beyond the last fringe of lush grass. He reached to move away the obscuring blades. Yes, that looked much like the top of a ladder.

"Ahah!" said Bandar, breaking off the thran to indulge in a moment of triumphant relief. Immediately, a scale-covered hand appeared from beyond the rim, seized his wrist with claw-tipped fingers and yanked him over the precipice.

Bandar's squawk was cut off by a hot, calloused palm pressed against his mouth. There was a reek of sulfur, and he was clutched by rock-hard arms against an equally unyielding chest, then he heard a flap of leathery wings and felt his stomach lurch as the creature that held him dropped into empty space.

They spiraled downward, affording Bandar a panoramic view of what

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lay beneath Heaven. There was a ladder; indeed, there were many. But though their tops were set against the grassy lip from which he had been seized, their bases were not grounded on the Earth far below. Instead, they were footed on a vast expanse of stone paving that was the top of an impossibly colossal construction that rose, tier upon tier, to thrust up through the clouds and end just below the celestial realm.

The tower top was thronged by legions of blood-red creatures, some winged, some not, but all armored in shining black chitin and clutching jagged-edged swords and hooked spears as they swarmed up the ladders.

As Bandar spun downward he saw the topmost of the invaders being boosted onto the grass and heard the piercing sound of a horn. Then he and his captor descended into a cloud and for a time all was mist. They emerged to fly beneath an overcast, dropping ever lower toward a great rent in the Earth from which foul clouds and odors emerged, as well as more marching legions of imps, demons and assorted fiends, all bound for the great tower.

The demon that held Bandar lifted its wings like a diving pigeon and plummeted into the reeking chasm. A choking darkness closed the noönaut's eyes and nose but he sensed that they fell a long, long way.

"IN A MOMENT, my servant will remove his hand from your mouth," said the occupant of the black iron throne. "If you attempt to say the name of You Know Whom," — one elongated finger directed its pointed tip at the roof of the vast underground cavern — "you will utter no more than the first syllable before your tongue is pulled out, sliced into manageable pieces and fed back to you. Are we clear?"

Bandar looked into the darkness of the speaker's eyes, which seemed to contain only impossibly distended pupils. He wished he could look away but he was by now too far acclimated to this Location, and the Adversary's powers gripped him the way a snake's unwavering gaze would hold a mouse.

He nodded and the palm went away. The other's upraised finger now reflectively stroked an aquiline jaw, its progress ending in a short triangular beard as black as the eyes above it. "What are you?" said the voice, as cool as silk.

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Bandar wished he'd studied more about the Heavens and Hells, but he had always been more compelled by Authentics than by Allegoricals. He knew, however, that within their Locations deities and their equivalents had all the powers with which their real-world believers credited them. So, in this context, he faced an authentic Principal of evil — or at least of unbridled ambition — that had all the necessary resources, both intellectual and occult, to battle an omnipotent deity to at least a stalemate. Bandar, who could not out-argue Didrick Gabbris, was not a contender.

The sulfur made him cough. Finally he managed to say, "A traveler, a mere visitor."

The triangular face nodded. "You must be. You're not one of mine and," — the fathomless eyes dropped to focus briefly on Bandar's vibrating wonderment — "you're certainly not one of His. But what else are you?"

Every Institute apprentice learned in First Week that the concept of thrans had originated in a dawntime myth about an ancient odist whose songs had kept him safe on a quest into the underworld. This knowledge gave Bandar hope as he said, "I am also a singer of songs. Would you care to hear one?"

The Adversary considered the question while Bandar attempted to control his expression. The distant gate he had sensed in Heaven was but a few paces across the cavern. He had only to voice the right notes, perhaps while strolling minstrel-like about the space before the throne, to call the rift into existence and escape through it.

"Why would you want to sing me a song?" said the Adversary.

"Oh, I don't know," said Bandar and was horrified to see the words take solid form as they left his mouth. They tumbled to the smoldering floor to assemble themselves into a wriggling bundle of legs and segmented body parts that scuttled toward the figure on the throne, climbed his black robes and nestled into the diabolical lap. The Principal idly stroked it with one languid hand, as if it were a favored pet.

"All lies are mine, of course," the soft voice said, "and I gave you no leave to use what is mine." He nodded to the winged fiend that still stood behind Bandar and the noönaut felt a icy pain as the thing inserted a claw into a sensitive part and scratched at the virtual flesh.

"Now," said the Adversary, when Bandar had ceased bleating and hopping, "the truth. What are you, why did you come here and, most

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urgent of all, how did you contrive to enter His realm behind His defenses?"

"If I tell you, may I go on my way?"

"Perhaps. But you *will* tell me. Ordinarily, I would enjoy having it pulled out of you piece by dripping piece, but today there is a certain urgency."

"Very well," Bandar said, "though the truth may not please you." And he told all of it — thrans, Locations, examinations, Gabbris, the smashed amphora — wondering as he did so what the repercussions might be. It was no great matter if the odd idiomat saw a sojourner pass by; but Bandar had never heard of an instance where a Principal was brought face to face with the unreality of all that he took to be real.

At the very least, the Institute would be displeased with Apprentice Guth Bandar. Yet, whatever punishment Senior Tutor might levy, Bandar could not imagine that it would be a worse fate than being absorbed into a Hell. Chastising malefactors, after all, was what such Locations did best.

When the noönaut had finished, the listener on the throne was silent for a long moment, stroking his concave cheek with a triangular nail, the great dark eyes turned inward. Finally he laid a considering gaze on Bandar and said, "Is that all? You've left out no pertinent details that might construe a trap for a hapless idiomatic entity such as I?"

Bandar had thought about trying to do exactly that, but had not been able to conceive of a means. Besides, he had expected this question and knew that any lie he attempted would only scamper off to its master, leaving Bandar to reexperience the demon's intruding claw, if not something worse.

"It is all."

The Adversary stroked at his beard. "You can imagine that this news comes as a shock."

"Yes."

"Even a disappointment."

"I express sympathy." It wasn't a lie. Bandar could express the sentiment without actually feeling it.

"It repeats forever? And I never win," he indicated the cavern's ceiling again, "against You Know Whom?"

"Never."

"What would you advise?" the archfiend asked, then added, "Honestly."

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Bandar thought it through but could come to no other conclusion. "You must be true to your nature."

The archfiend sighed. "That I already knew." He reflected for a moment then went on, "It ought to be comforting to know exactly why one exists. Instead I find it depressing."

A silence ensued. Bandar became uncomfortable. "I can offer one solace."

The dark eyes looked at him. "It had better be exceptionally good. I usually need to see a great deal of suffering before I am comforted."

Bandar swallowed again and said, "When your Location's cycle ends and recommences, you will not know of this."

"Hmm," said the other. "Thin comfort indeed. Knowledgeability is my foremost pride. To know that I shall become ignorant is a poor consolation until ignorance at last descends. The battle up there may go on for eons. I must think about this."

Bandar said nothing and attempted to arrange his mismatched features into an expression of studied neutrality. He saw thoughts making their presence known on the Adversary's features, then he saw his captor's gaze harden and knew the archfiend had come to the inevitable conclusion.

The voice was not just cool now; it was chilled. "I see. If I keep you and make you part of this 'Location,' as you call it, then might I expect you to regularly reappear and remind me that I am not what I thought I was?"

"I do not know how much of my persona would survive the process, but there is a risk," said Bandar. "I would be happy to relieve you of it by moving on."

"Hmm," said the other. "But someone must suffer for my pain. If not you, then who?"

Bandar looked around the smoky cavern. All the demons and imps seemed to be regarding him without sympathy.

He thought quickly, then said, "I may have an idea."

Intoning the three threes, Bandar scaled the ladder that reached to the brink of Heaven. The first assault had failed and the invaders had pulled back, leaving mangled fiends and demons heaped on the tower's top and scattered about the narrow strip of celestial turf that marked the limit of their advance.

Angels of lower rank were now heaving the fallen over the edge and casting down the scaling ladders so that Bandar had to climb with

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scampering haste to avoid being toppled. He picked his way across the grass, stepping over bodies and dodging the cleanup. There was a sharp tang of ozone to the otherwise delicious air of Heaven; an inner voice told him it was the afterscent of thunderbolts.

No one paid him any notice as he made his way between regiments of angelic defenders, drawn up in precise blocks and wedges, their armor and weaponry dazzling and the space above their heads almost conflagrant with massed halos. But beyond the rearmost ranks he saw others laid upon the grass, their auras flickering and dim, shattered armor piled beside them.

As he neared the recumbent forms he heard again the whoosh of great wings. Huge figures gracefully alit and gathered up the fallen angels, then took to the air and winged away. Urged by his inner voice, Bandar ran toward the evacuation and, seizing the robe of an archangel, climbed to the broad span between his wings. His tiny fists made it hard to hold on as the great pinions struck the air and they sprang aloft.

So far, so good, said the voice. Bandar was too busy clutching and intoning to frame a response. They climbed above the fields and woods of heaven, until the great rivers were mere scratches of silver on green. For a long time, the archangel's wings dominated the air with metronomic strokes; then the rhythm ceased and the great feathered sails held steady as they glided down toward a city of shining stone upon a conical hill, with serried roofs and pillars and windows that flashed like gems. The archangel alighted on a pristine pavement and carried the angel in his arms toward a vast edifice of marble and alabaster.

Down, said the inner voice, and Bandar descended, clutching handfuls of angelic fabric until his feet touched the polished flags. *Turn right and go up the hill. There's a staircase.*

Bandar wanted to say, "This is unwise," but he was afraid that to cease intoning the thran in this part of the Location would invite a blast from on high. He topped the staircase and came upon a broad plaza of more white stone accented by inlays of colored gems. On the other side of the square stood an enormous rotunda — yet more white stone, though this one was roofed with a golden dome. Its gigantic doors — still more gold, bedizened with mosaics of gems — gaped open, throwing out an effulgence of light and a glorious sound of massed voices.

Here we go, said the inner urging. Bandar advanced on trembling legs

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until he stood in the doorway. The interior was incandescent with magnificence. Rank upon rank of angels stood on wall-climbing terraces, singing unparalleled choruses to the great white-bearded figure who sat on a diamond throne that grew from the middle of a diamond floor.

In, said the voice in Bandar's mind, *and keep chanting*. The noönaut's legs could not have felt looser if they had been made of boiled asparagus, but he did as he was told, crossing the brilliant floor until he stood directly before the throne. Its occupant's feet rested on a footstool that resembled a globe of the Earth, just at Bandar's eye level. He noticed that the bare toes bore delicate hairs of gold.

The sojourner stood, awaiting direction from within. It was hard to keep intoning the thran while the thousands of perfect voices sang in flawless harmony a song that thrilled the soul.

It's always the same song, you know, said his passenger. *He never tires of hearing it, and they know better than to tire of singing it.*

The music was climbing, crescendo upon crescendo, ravishing notes impossibly achieved and sustained, quavering tremolos that intoxicated the senses. It was all Bandar could do to keep intoning the three threes, especially with his distorted vocal equipment and the difficulty compounded by the sharpness of hearing that his elephantine ears provided.

Wait for it.

The thunderous chorus was now pealing out such a paean of praise that Bandar feared the golden dome might lift away.

Almost.

The voices soared to the brink of climax.

Now.

Bandar ceased intoning the thran. From the point of view of the idiomats, including the Principal on the throne, he suddenly appeared before them, with all his acquired anatomical peculiarities on full display.

The music stopped in mid-melisma. There was an instant silence so profound that Bandar wondered for a moment if he had been struck deaf. Then he heard the thrumming sound of the giant crimson monstrosity that still vibrated on his front.

Perfect, said the inner voice. *Open up, here I come.*

Bandar opened his mouth. He felt the same unpleasant sensation of stretching and an urge to gag that he had experienced when the Adversary

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had entered him down in the sulfurous cavern. A moment later the sinister figure was standing beside him, looking up at the divine face staring down at him from the throne of Heaven.

The archfiend raised his arms and cried, "Surprise!"

"IT'S ALWAYS much easier to get out of Heaven than to get in," commented the Adversary, as they plummeted toward the lake of fire. When the heat grew uncomfortable for Bandar, the archfiend considerately sprouted wings — much like an archangel's, though somber of feather — and swept the noönaut to safety in a subterranean passageway that led back to the cavern of the iron throne.

"Are you going to keep your promise?" said Bandar.

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't," said the Principal, "but I don't want you popping up in every cycle to remind me of my futility."

"Thank you," Bandar said.

"Although it goes against my nature to be fair, you do deserve any reward in my power to grant." The dark eyes unfocused for a moment as their owner looked inward to memory. "The expression on His face. The way His eyes popped. That was worth anything. I will keep the war going as long as possible just so I can retain that image."

"I will be happy to accept what we discussed," Bandar said.

"Very well." The Adversary looked at him. "It is done."

Bandar consulted his own memory and found there a complete chart of the noösphere, exactly like the great globe suspended in the Institute's communal study chamber. Or was it?

"Is it real?" he asked.

"I have no idea," said the archfiend. "Since your arrival my concept of reality has been severely edited. I used my powers to improve your memory. I can assure you, however, that it will lead you away from here, I hope forever. I do not want you back." His long fingers imitated the action of walking. "Off you go."

Bandar consulted the globe and saw that the gate in the cavern led to a selection of Locations, depending on which thran was used to activate it. He returned the map to his memory, chose the seven and one and stepped through the rift.

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He was overjoyed to find himself in a shaded forest of giant conifers. He recognized a particular tree not more than a few paces distant, strode to it and sang a handful of notes. Again the air rippled and he departed the forest to emerge into hot sunlight on a white beach strung between laden coconut palms and gentle wavelets.

"I have overcome!" he cried.

"You have certainly achieved some sort of distinction," said the nasal voice of Didrick Gabbris. Bandar turned to meet his rival's sneer. Gabbris lounged in the shade of a palm. Beside him, Senior Tutor Eldred inspected Bandar in detail, from the tiny skull with its flapping ears and pendulous nose down to the minuscule hands and the crimson humming centerpiece. When he had finished the catalog, his face formed an expression that Bandar found uncannily like that which he had recently seen on a deity.

"I can explain," the apprentice said.

"Not well enough," predicted Eldred.

It was a prescient observation. The Institute decided that Guth Bandar was not what they were seeking in a new generation of noönauts. Nor was Didrick Gabbris, for Bandar's account of the shattered urn was believed and he had the compensatory satisfaction of seeing his enemy driven from the cloister while he was still being debriefed by a hastily convened inquiry.

Bandar learned that in the tens of thousands of years that noönauts had been visiting the Commons, other sojourners had run afoul of Principals, though no one, it seemed, had ever shaken the confidence of both a god and his chief opponent. It was decided that the contaminated Locations would be declared out of bounds for a few centuries to give them time to recycle.

Bandar returned to the family firm and took up buying and selling. But in his leisure hours he would sit crosslegged, and summon up his perfect map of the noösphere. He soon found an Allegorical Location entirely peopled by nubile young women. And with his ability to make useful modifications to his virtual anatomy, the idiomats were always delighted to receive him.

He decided that a little learning was only dangerous when spread too thin.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Midnighters: The Secret Hour, by Scott Westerfeld, Eos, 2004, $15.99.

MAYBE IT'S just me, but there's something seductive about walking around in a city so late at night that you have the streets entirely to yourself. It's a magical time when the whole world seems to be full of possibilities one can't imagine in the daylight. The late Richard Laymon had a take on it in a book called *Night in the Lonesome October*, reviewed in the March 2002 issue, but being Laymon, it was a very dark and grisly perspective.

Westerfield's book has its moments of darkness, and more than a few thrills, but it's a kinder book. The opening scenes are especially fascinating as we meet the various Midnighters, including the newest one, Jessica Day, newly moved to Bixby, OK.

What's a Midnighter? Well, apparently the day actually has twenty-five hours, but one of them has been compressed into the moment of midnight. It's a place of refuge for dark creatures, banished there eons ago. But a few humans can also experience that hour.

This is what happens to Jessica on her first night in Bixby. She wakes in what she thinks is a dream and goes out walking in the rain, rain that is frozen in place and looks like a million diamonds floating in the sky. Until she touches the drops and then they turn to water.

She soon discovers that there are other Midnighters, each of whom has a "power" — that only manifests during the day's twenty-fifth hour. One can float in the air, almost weightless; another can read minds, and that sort of thing. Unfortunately, the creatures that inhabit the midnight hour have taken an instant dislike to Jessica and are appearing in ever-growing numbers and ever-larger, more

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fearsome shapes in an effort to destroy her.

So unless she can figure out why, and what her midnight power is, she might not live through the next midnight hour....

Westerfield's book starts out intriguing, and remains a fun read, but it's not much of a Big Think novel, and turns out to be more like an episode of a WB teen series. Which isn't a bad thing, but it does mean that while the main story here resolves, a larger story arc carries on, presumably to go further in a future book.

Odd Thomas, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2003, $26.95.

There aren't many writers with a body of work as large as Koontz's who can still grab me with their ability to surprise and delight. At this point in a career as long as his, we expect the author to have a handle on the usual elements of good story — evocative characters, tight plot, strong prose — and Koontz certainly does. But book after book, he continues to find the sort of innovative takes on his themes that always make me smile in anticipation when I start to understand where the book is going.

The title character of *Odd Thomas* sees the dead and has prescient dreams. Both require him to take action, because if he doesn't, he knows that Worse Things will happen.

Now before you say, oh come on, like we haven't seen that before, let me tell you that Koontz really makes it his own. That, however, is all I will tell you, because I don't want to spoil the surprises for you except to mention that a mute Elvis is one of the peripheral characters.

And while Koontz writes thrillers with a dark edge, he doesn't lose sight of either the light we carry in us, or his sense of humor. The mix of these elements have been present in most of his titles over the past few years, but in *Odd Thomas*, the blend is seamless. It's creepy, wise, and funny, and the character of Thomas himself has an especially big heart.

But the ending....

I think a little piece of *my* heart broke when I got to the end of this book. But that doesn't stop me from recommending it highly.

Restless, by Rich Wallace, Viking, 2003, $15.99.

Another book dealing with ghosts, except this one focuses on only a pair of them: that of Eamon

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Connelly, a long-dead Irish dockworker, and Frank, the book's narrator and brother to high school senior Herbie. Most of the book functions as a third-person narrative of Herbie's life, balancing sports, studies, a new girlfriend, and, oh yeah, the dead spirit of Connelly that he keeps seeing in the cemetery where he goes running.

But Herbie doesn't want to see Connelly, much though he's intrigued by the idea of ghosts being real. What he wants is to connect with the brother he misses so much.

How the three lives (or unlives, I suppose, in the case of two of them) connect makes for a fascinating and moving book. I especially liked how Wallace handled Herbie's character. Herbie is a jock throughout, and for a non-jock with preconceptions (borne out through my own high school years) I was pleasantly surprised with the likability of the character. It made me realize that my own generalizations about jocks were as unfair as theirs were of the weird little hippie kid that I was (and doesn't that date me?).

I'd recommend *Restless* for any number of reasons, from Wallace's insightful characterizations to his interesting take on ghosts, but mostly because it's just a really good story.

The Double Shadow, by Clark Ashton Smith, Wildside Press, 2003, $15.

Let me get my carps out of the way first: *The Double Shadow* has, hands down, one of the worst covers it's been my misfortune to run across in years — and trust me, I see some bad ones. I can't imagine the cover inviting anyone to pick it up in a bookstore, except perhaps to show it in disbelief to a friend before hastily shelving it once more.

Less important, but still aesthetically displeasing, is the inside layout: the text has the appearance of being double spaced, making it look like a manuscript, rather than a finished book.

They're unfortunate choices because neither element will attract most readers, especially not contemporary readers accustomed to more attractive packaging and design who might not be familiar with Smith's work.

The good news is that these six stories are fine examples of Smith's exotic storytelling talents. They're full of strange names, curious landscapes, and convoluted plots, all decked out in a prose that might seem overwritten, but is actually quite charming in the same way that a good print of an old black-and-

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white film can be. You enter the story slightly amused at the quaintness of it all, but the storytelling soon pulls you in and you forget everything but the events that are unfolding.

These stories originally appeared in a limited edition pamphlet, self-published back in 1932, and most of them haven't seen print since—certainly not in the author's preferred text. Although "The Maze of the Enchanter" has been subsequently reprinted in an edited version, the other stories aren't familiar to this reader who was introduced to Smith's work through Lin Carter's series of fantasy reprints, the wonderful classics that appeared from Ballantine under the Unicorn banner in the early seventies.

If you're interested in the history of the field, and aren't familiar with Smith, this slim collection makes an excellent introduction to his writing. For a touchstone to Smith's work, you could say that his stories fall into those borderlands where the books of Lord Dunsany and H. P. Lovecraft might meet.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Prince of Ayodhya: The Ramayana, Book One, by Ashok K. Banker, Warner Aspect, 2003, $24.95.

The Guin Saga, Book One: The Leopard Mask, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, $22.95.

The Guin Saga, Book Two: Warrior in the Wilderness, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, $22.95.

The Guin Saga, Book Three: The Battle of Nospherus, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, $22.95.

The Anvil of the World, by Kage Baker, Tor, 2003, $25.95.

Tooth and Claw, by Jo Walton, Tor, 2003, $24.95.

J. R. R. Tolkien seems to be everywhere these days. And it's not just the hugely popular films and all their attendant detritus — television commercials, plastic figurines, video games, collect-'em-all cups at fast food joints. Tolkien's shadow has fallen long and hard across the field of fantasy fiction since the mid-1970s, with the appearance of Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara*, Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and David Eddings's *Belgariad*. The defining features of most fantasy written today — complexly imagined alternate worlds (complete with maps), elves and dwarves and trolls, artifacts of magical power, fateful struggles between good and evil, the basic trilogy format — trace their ancestry back to *The Lord of the Rings*, one way or another. The rise of Robert Jordan has only cemented the dominion of the "Tolkienesque."

The old don would be shocked (and, I think, dismayed) to see what his work has wrought.

I'm a great admirer of Tolkien's grand epic, but I have to admit I'm bored by the efforts of his literary

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grandchildren. Fortunately, they haven't squeezed everyone else out — not yet. But it can take a bit more work to find something unusual.

Tolkien drew for inspiration on the myths, legends, languages, and landscapes of northern Europe, and Tolkienesque fantasy has continued to depend (often at second and third hand) on that background for its settings and details. So one obvious place to look for relief from the usual formula is in fantasies that mine other cultural veins for their raw materials. Ashok K. Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya* is the first volume of what he calls a "twenty-first century retelling" of the great Hindu epic *Ramayana*, which would seem to promise a very different fantasy experience.

The *Ramayana* in the form we know it first coalesced in the fourth or fifth century BCE, but it clearly harks back to India's legendary age, around the twelfth century BCE, when the peoples and kingdoms that would later dominate the subcontinent were not yet solidly established. It is to ancient India something of what the *Odyssey* is to ancient Greece.

One of the keys to good fantasy fiction is the coherence and internal credibility of the imagined world of the text, and by starting from an existing work of literature with a fairly well-defined cultural and historical milieu, Banker's got a great head start. He doesn't have to make it all up on his own. Unfortunately, he squanders that advantage; he doesn't make enough use of the richness of his source material.

The poem recounts the tale of Rama, prince of the Kosalas and avatar of the god Vishnu — his exile from his father's court in Ayodhya, his union with his destined bride Sita, her abduction by the demon-lord Ravana of Lanka, and Rama's war on Lanka to recover her. Banker has retained most of the essential characters and elements (it's hard to be sure, since this is only the first volume of Banker's version), but he has refashioned the story in some very significant ways. As *Prince of Ayodhya* begins, the lord of Lanka is already plotting to invade the human kingdoms with his demon hordes. Ravana has spies in Ayodhya, and sends a shape-shifting *rakshasa* to try to kill Rama's father, Dasaratha, the king. Rama's exile comes about not merely as a result of intrigues between Dasaratha's wives, but as part of the mage Vishwamitra's plan to thwart the Lankan invasion.

Like any ancient literary work, the *Ramayana* is the product of a

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time and tradition radically unlike our own, and it certainly requires some adaptation and interpretation on Banker's part to render it as a novel. The trouble is that Banker's changes have made a distinctively different sort of story into something that feels depressingly familiar. Banker's Ravana becomes just another Dark Lord threatening the world with destruction, and his Rama seems not a semi-divine presence but merely another wizard-counseled warrior to stand against the tide of evil.

This disappointment is made the more severe by Banker's habit of mixing unmistakably inappropriate vocabulary into his prose. Throughout *Prince of Ayodhya*, we stumble over terms such as "tight abs," "morphed," "doable," and "topside" that belong (if at all) in a novel set today, not in a fantasy world based on an ancient epic. Similar lapses mar the cultural background that Banker presents. If the *Ramayana* has any natural setting, it's the very early Iron Age, yet Ayodhyan weapons frequently feature steel. The scribes of the Ayodhyan court write with quills on parchment scrolls, like medieval European monks (in fact, as far as we can tell, the ancient Ayodhyans may not have used writing at all). And the palace contains a painted portrait of Vishwamitra which Banker refers to as a "canvas," though such a material would scarcely have been in use then.

It's not a question of historical accuracy — Banker is of course free to imagine any details he likes for his version of the story — but again, when he choses to depart from his model, he most often heads in a blander, more generic direction. Banker essentially offers us a Tolkienesque *Ramayana*.

This is not to say that *Prince of Ayodhya* is without its pleasures, and even hints of unusual atmosphere. It's interesting how the vast lifespans of mages like Vishwamitra pass almost without comment, accepted by the characters as the way their world works. Some of the scenes of Dasaratha and his first wife, Rama's mother Kausalya, convey both genuine feeling and a sense of otherness, of a different thought-world. After Rama heads into exile midway through the book, we get more moments like this: "Without needing to be told, they prostrated themselves at his feet to receive his ashirwaad, then sat facing him in the cross-legged lotus posture, the traditional yogic stance of shishyas receiving vidya from their guru."

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That's a sentence that has some rhythm and colorful detail, in which the unfamiliar terms feel organic and unforced. Banker gives us just enough such nibbles to make us wish he had stuck more closely to his model, and produced a fantasy more notably different from the others beside it on the shelves.

Kaoru Kurimoto's hugely popular *Guin Saga* doesn't draw on any non-European cultural reservoir for its background or flavor, but its inspiration does come from a distinctly non-Tolkienesque source. The author traces her literary heritage to the sword-and-sorcery of Robert E. Howard and other writers of the old pulps — a brand of fantasy that's been all but eliminated by the children of the *Rings*.

In fact, though it's just now appearing in English, Kurimoto's long-running series began in 1979, before the wave of Tolkien followers had crested, and the name of Conan had not yet become inseparable from that of Schwarzenegger.

Kurimoto's hero is as fearless and ferocious as Howard's Cimmerian, though he's rather more mysterious. Guin has lost most of his memory, and he's cursed with an irremovable leopard mask that hides his features. Or is it a mask? Kurimoto plays it coy (at least through the three volumes that have appeared so far). Perhaps Guin is some sort of demigod, and the leopard features are his own.

In the first volume, *The Leopard Mask*, Guin befriends the twins Rinda and Remus, last survivors of the royal house of recently conquered Parros, and the action barely lets up after the first few pages. Guin battles soldiers from the conquering army of Mongaul, but the three are taken prisoner to Stafolos Keep, under the command of the fearsome Black Count Vanon. There they encounter the mercenary Istavan, a fellow prisoner, and rescue the girl Suni, one of the wild monkey-like Sem, destined for sacrifice by the Black Count. In the second book, *Warrior in the Wilderness*, their escape carries the five of them down the river Kes and then into the wastelands of Nospherus, where they are pursued by the Mongauli and beset by a variety of horrid creatures. That pursuit continues in *The Battle of Nospherus*, as the fugitives ally themselves with the Sem against the invading forces of Mongaul.

I get a little breathless just typing all that, and it's nothing compared to the experience of reading the Guin books. They're like

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Robert E. Howard crossed with manga and a triple espresso — pure adventure fiction without the brooding undercurrent that gives Howard's best work its enduring power. The writing, at least in these early books (Kurimoto has published eighty-eight Guin books so far in Japan), is somewhat rougher-hewn than even that of the old pulp writers. The tone changes wildly, from somber and even lyrical to shrill and jarringly colloquial (I can't imagine what Japanese word the translators render as "skedaddle"), and the narrative point of view varies just as unpredictably — nearly every character with a name gets some time in the spotlight. But Kurimoto's prose also reveals flashes of tantalizing beauty, such as this: "The campfire wavered, and time began to flow again. In the light of the fire were four creatures of flesh and blood, all walking the threads of Jarn's loom, all mortal."

Such moments, and the naïve charm and headlong energy of the story, make the *Guin Saga* a lightweight but welcome break from the ponderousness of the Tolkien school. But it's hard to conceive of the appeal lasting for the author's projected one hundred volumes. Perhaps Kurimoto adds more complexity and depth as the story continues. She would need to, in order to keep me reading.

Kage Baker's latest novel, *The Anvil of the World*, doesn't derive from any obvious sources — not a well-established fantasy mode such as Tolkien's or Howard's, nor an ancient epic, nor any existing culture's mythic tradition, nor even Baker's own acclaimed earlier novels about the time-traveling employees of The Company. *The Anvil of the World* is that most unusual and refreshing of discoveries: a fantasy that feels like it sprang from nowhere but the quirky imagination of its author.

Baker's world is a rococo blend of colorfully disparate elements, from costume balls where guests sip beer through straws to assassins attacking from hang gliders. Gourmet cuisine shares the pages with poison-dart blowguns, tiny dragons nesting in sea cliffs like gulls, and a troop of demon bodyguards named Cutt, Crish, Stabb, and Strangel. You never know what *The Anvil of the World* will throw at you next, and that alone would make it one of the most entertaining fantasies of recent years. Toss in Baker's characteristic wit, her smooth and confident prose, and her deft hand at

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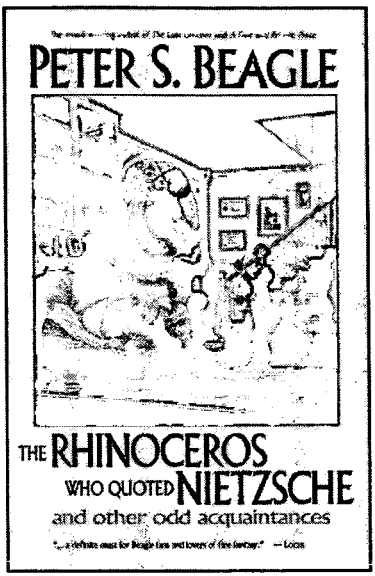
slipping in the occasional reference to contemporary issues, and you've got a genuine delight.

There's no grand quest here, no unlikely hero coming of age, no ancient evil bent on world domination. Baker's story takes place on a more modest, everyday scale. It centers on a former assassin living under the name of Smith, trying to escape his violent past and anyone who might bear him a grudge. Smith takes a job leading one of his cousin's caravans to the coastal town of Salesh-by-the-Sea, and on that disaster-plagued trip he becomes entangled with a variety of peculiar characters, including the foppish half-demon Lord Ermenwyr and his multitalented nurse Balnshik. Smith sets up as an innkeeper in Salesh, but his troubles are hardly over. Ermenwyr brings a sorcerous duel to Smith's doorstep. Another guest dies, and it looks like one of Smith's employees may have killed him. And the inn's drains are backing up; the safety inspectors breathing down his neck.

The plot zips along and the dialogue is even zippier, but it's Baker's characters that truly capture our affection — they, and Baker's sly, infectious humor, which infuses the text like incense. Some of the best lines go to



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Peter S. Beagle is the author of *The Last Unicorn*, *A Fine and Private Place*, and *The Innkeeper's Song*. He is a winner of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award and the Locus Award. He lives in Oakland, CA.

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Ermenwyr: "It's a facial toupee," he insists when his beard is revealed as a fake. And later, of his doctor, Willowspear, "He's a Disciple, you know. Has all the sex drive of a grain of rice, so skittish young ladies in need of a supportive shoulder should find him irresistible."

It's a tough trick to balance a tone like that with the apparatus of fantasy, but Baker manages it nearly flawlessly. *The Anvil of the World* recalls the best of Roger Zelazny's lighter side, the stories of Dilvish the Damned or his 1993 novel, *A Night in the Lonesome October*. It's unlike any other fantasy of the past decade, and that should be recommendation enough.

Jo Walton's *Tooth and Claw* is a fantasy as distinctive and unpredictable as Baker's. In her previous novels, Walton brought an interesting perspective to the well-worked ground of Arthurian fantasy, but in *Tooth and Claw*, she has produced something utterly *sui generis*.

Walton has a clear model, the "sensitive Victorian novel," especially the works of Anthony Trollope. And she plays all the notes, with a story of family quarrels, disputed inheritances, class anxiety, and marriage proposals galore. Where she departs from her model is in that all her characters are dragons.

On its face it sounds like the sort of idea one comes up with over drinks — something much more amusing in concept than it ever could be full-blown — but Walton makes it work. In large part her success is due to the intricate social world she creates for her dragons — it's similar enough to the Victorian to allow the story to work, but it's got a credible basis in the biology of her dragons.

She doesn't have them living in stately Victorian country houses or wearing trousers and bustles. Her dragons's homes are cave-like, and they go about without clothing (except for jewelry and hats). They dine messily on raw haunches of beef and mutton. Some of them breathe fire. But they do all this with the air of decorum and propriety appropriate to the English lawn tennis set.

Walton's tale begins with a dispute over the will of Bon Agornin, a dragon of the minor gentry. For dragons, the inheritance is more than just the patriarch's hoard, it's also his very body, since dragons only grow by eating the flesh of other dragons. Agornin's grasping son-in-law Daverak insists on a large share

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of the body, despite the objections of Agornin's sons Penn and Avan, and Avan determines to take Daverak to court for redress, though Daverak's much loftier social standing almost surely dooms his suit. Meanwhile, the local parson Frelt has his eye set on Agornin's daughter Selendra, while Selendra finds herself falling for her brother Penn's liege lord, Sher Benandi, hopelessly out of her league. And so the plots are launched, and become increasingly tangled as they go.

As in the novels it recalls (and in other recent pastiches, such as Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*), we can't help but get caught up in the undeniably contrived twists and turns, and yearn for it all to work out right, with justice served, the wicked punished, and the right couples paired off and comfortable at the end. There's still something seductive about stories like this, something that hooks us beneath whatever layers of jaded world-weariness we might have acquired.

It's a rare book that leaves me wishing it were twice as long, but *Tooth and Claw* is one such. As I neared the end I found I didn't want to leave Walton's dragons behind. I wanted to see more of their comical law courts, I wanted to witness a performance at the theater, I wanted to see how the growing movement for social reform worked out. But then, once finished, with all the plot strands neatly tied up, I thought I could do without a sequel. *Tooth and Claw* has a kind of perfection just as it is, as does *The Anvil of the World*. These two books prove not only that inventive, original fantasies are still being written, but that the compulsion to produce three or more volumes is a curse on the field. As they say in show biz, "Always leave them wanting more." Fantasy writers should take note.

SF Humor! An alien archeologist finds love among the "runes" in the fabled Greek Isles

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A. A. Attanasio is the author of more than a dozen novels, including Radix, Wyvern, The Moon's Wife, *and several novels published under the pen name of Adam Lee. His more recent books include the Arthurian fantasy* The Serpent and the Grail *and a supernatural thriller entitled* The Crow: Hellbound. *He's currently working on a Young Adult fantasy of the rodeo entitled* Billy the Kidded. *His* F&SF *debut is a stylish and captivating love story of an unusual sort.*

Zero's Twin

By A. A. Attanasio

THE MUG SHE HAD USED still felt hot two years later. Sometimes, he slept with it, to comfort himself and to remember, when he woke, that once in his life there had been miracles.

Nothing about that time seemed real anymore — especially the dream where he first met her, a dream and the strange events that had followed in his waking life, dream and reality reaching for each other like halves of a broken magnet.

He looked a lot like a donkey, with a head much too big for his body and bristly hair blue as ashes. His long rabbit face and big teeth appeared almost friendly, except for those devilish eyes, narrow and wickedly tapered. It was a face that made people leave him alone.

He preferred that. Work used him up and depleted any ambition to explain himself. "The conquest of zero," he told those who pressed, and that usually sufficed. For those who insisted on more, a forlorn sigh escaped lungs crushed by the hopelessness of explaining himself. "I'm a

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mathematician obsessed with Dedekind domains — partitions of real numbers — in particular, algebraically closed fields called combinatorial Nullstellensatz — a German term that means 'zero place theorem' — where infinity and the empty set of zero are related. I call myself a zero hero."

In the dream where he first met her, she sat at the foot of his bed in the Moon's milky blue light. He knew he was dreaming. It was a lucid dream, in which he marveled at the precision of details evoked by his sleeping brain. His austere room appeared exactly as in waking life. Her presence alone informed him he was dreaming.

She had hair white and watery as spider's milk. Veins crossed her brow like a washed-out road map. Loneliness completed itself in her eyes, stunned pupils and irises blue as stretched rainbows on bursting bubbles.

"Suppose time is like space. *Exactly* like space." She spoke tenderly, her voice quivering starlight, words almost defeated by silence, by enormous distances traversed from far within her brain.

Dreams are like that. One knows the most impertinent things. He knew that her brain loomed vast and menacing as night, the very brink of outer space, and her voice was the hem of infinity. He accepted this, because he knew he was dreaming.

"If time is like space," said he, choosing to play along with his antic reverie, "then change is an illusion."

Her smile cut his heart. "You understand!"

"Sure."

He noticed she wore odd garments, gauzy and tattered as a desperate angel's and printed with breathing paisleys conspiring across the contours of her body like shadow puppets. "Time *is* space," he spoke in his dream, feeling not a little foolish. "That's Einstein's general relativity. The distribution of mass configures spacetime. Enough mass and spacetime bends around itself. Black holes."

She leaned her head to one side as if listening deeply to music, and those bursting blue eyes glistened brighter, blown pupils abruptly tightening to pinprick apertures before his brilliance. "Then, you accept that

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events do not become, nor have they been, and so, they will not be? Events simply are. Yes?"

"Yeah, right." He shrugged and wondered if he should just lean forward and kiss those blond lips, that butterfly mouth, his own soul's tender, vulnerable stinginess. *No boundaries to a dream,* he thought even as he chose instead to speak, "If time is space, we reach events in the future by displacing ourselves in time. And so, change does not exist. Change is an illusion. There's just an immense now with a vast range of points. It's like going to the kitchen. The kitchen doesn't come into existence because we go to it. It's always been there. Same with the future."

The butterfly mouth opened to a lavish smile, tears sparked, flung arms embraced him, and the soft blow of her body knocked him awake. From across the gulf of the dream, her breath touched him between heartbeats with surprise and terror, the tip of a claw, "I think I love you."

For a week after that dream, his heart swung like twenty pounds of misery in his chest. Inhumanly beautiful, the only woman he had ever loved was a dream he would never have again. What was this hugeness a dream had transformed his heart into when he wasn't ready for it? He was in love, in the hardest way, with a figment, an irreality, insubstantial as zero.

The irony occupied him like inoperable cancer. His obsession for work, for the infinity of zero, had transformed into an obsession with this dream woman, this beautiful emptiness he had never asked for.

His work stopped. This upset his employers, who wanted to create a qubit computer. The qubit, data encoded in the superimposed quantum states or entanglements of single atoms, enabled the performance of stupendously large numbers of calculations simultaneously — in sub-atomic space. The challenge lay in preserving the coherence of this data as the quantum system interacted with its environment. For that, they needed a quantum error correcting code, which in turn required a weak Nullstellensatz ideal, a way of defeating the complexifying polynomials of decoherence, the noise that smeared encoded data to zero. To defeat zero meant protecting quantum coherence — and the qubit.

But the dream of the woman with spider milk hair had dismantled his

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obsession, and no enticements of money, status, or perquisites could build again the heart she had broken.

The day he lost his job, she came to him. He was sitting in the park, watching a kid's kite tracing infinity's sign in the sky. From the edge of sight, a bright minnow of radiance turned his head. She stood in the sharp sunlight between trees, wearing wraparound glasses black as beetle shells. Her slick, white hair glistened with sugary light.

He stood up and sat down again with a loud cough, "You!"

Whatever she said got swallowed by a jet's sham of thunder. The wind pressed peculiar pleats of her moth-skin gown sleekly against the curves of her body. As she walked toward him, the fabric's shadowswirl pattern unraveled fluttering glances of nakedness.

"Who are you?" he asked in a stricken voice.

She flowed onto the bench beside him. "Your creator."

The lucid dream, her beauty digressive as an angel's, and that chill fragrance peeling from her like a vast baby-blue exhalation of heaven made him ask, "God?"

"That's *the* Creator, silly." Her laugh glittered like pollen. "I only made you."

"Made me?"

"You, the weather, everyone in it — this whole world — is born out of *us*, beings like me." Her pale smile pressed closer. "But you're all mine. I made you."

With roundabout eyes, he looked to see if anyone in the park was watching. Children scrammed across the sward chasing a rubber Buckyball. Bicyclists swished along distant bike paths. A dog walker bent to his odious task in the silks of sunlight under a nearby oak.

When he faced her again, he glimpsed twin reflections of his fish-eyed fright in her dark glasses. She said, with a brisk smile, "Change is illusion — and so, effects can be their own causes."

He heaved a big, nervous laugh. "That's absurd!"

"Only because you're addicted to time." Islands of cumulus drifted across her dark lenses. "I thought you knew better. We talked about this.

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Remember? Our bedroom chat?" She cocked her head knowingly. "You're not one of those chronocentrics convinced that reality consists of a series of nows, are you? Come on!" Her face pulsed with silent laughter. "You really think moments pass from the past to the present and on into the future?" She placed slender hands on his shoulders, her thin arms fluorescent tubes, and addressed him like a child. "Special relativity urges a contrary claim, you know. Time passes at a different rate depending on how fast a person is moving. One person's now is another's past — or future."

"So...someone from the future can — change the past?"

"Effects can be their own causes."

"And you?" Inside its cage, his heart skittered like a small animal. "You're from — the future?"

"I'm from the world your qubit computer will make possible." A turn of the wind, and her hair rippled between them like white acetylene. "I made you — to make me."

Dogs frolicked, bicycles shuttled under the trees, and children chased a black-and-white Buckyball back and forth across the sward. "Why are you here?"

"We have always been here. We've been in touch with this world from the beginning. In fact, we built this world." Her fingertips, cool as mirrors, traced the edges of his face. "The future already exists, and we are generating, down to the smallest details, the specific everyday reality of life on Earth that you take for granted." Her thumbs glided over the wings of his nostrils. "We arranged the distribution of matter and its motions in this corner of the universe to generate the features of time that seem so ordinary to you. Coincidences, accidents, all manner of interactions on microscopic as well as macroscopic scales are effects whose causes have yet to exist." She pressed the tip of his nose like a doorbell. "Your emergence as a species — and even as an individual — has origins not in the past but in the future. Time travelers and their influences from the future are far more common than you realize."

"You've fabricated...everything?" His thick features congealed to a frown. "Why?"

"Think of it as an art gallery — or a movie set." In the slant light, she

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removed her shades, revealing the diamond blue irises and coma-caliber pupils of his dream. "Everything is arranged."

"But why?"

"A necessary game," she answered in a spicy whisper. "A flight of creativity." She sat back heavily with a lopsided smile and looked tenderly sick. "But I fell for you."

She tilted her joyful eyes upward in disbelief. "So freely rendered, you were supposed to be just another artifact among the kaleidoscopic atoms. I'm as surprised as you. I'm in love with your crazy obsession to vanquish zero — with your big hee-haw face — and your galumphing walk — and your body odor like roasted pecans — and the stupid way you're looking at me now, wondering if all this is a dream. I've fallen in love with you — with my own creation."

He honestly thought he had lost his mind. With an ache in his heart, he knew this was not some dream. He was awake. A soccer ball rolled up to the bench, the spherically wondrous geometry of a truncated icosahedron. She picked it up and handed it to the boy who ran over to retrieve it. Her babydoll profile appeared so ordinary. The boy thanked her brusquely and didn't think there was anything at all strange about retrieving his Buckyball from a denizen of a time yet to be.

Exultant in her slim smile, she said without looking at him, "10^{17} seconds ago, that boy, his ball, and every atom in this entire universe was pure energy at the instant of the big bang." She inhaled deeply the tang of pollen and the acrid nearness of the city. "And the second before that?"

"You set off the big bang?"

"No. We're locals. But I can introduce you to the ones who did." She waved her hand dismissively. "But that's not why I'm here. I came to tell you that I love you." She said this, but all he could really hear was the sound of his heartbeat. "I want you to come with me. You're mine. I created you, and I want to bring you to a life bigger than this rigid diurnal sculpture. Sunrise and sunset — a rock spinning in the void. There's so much more I want to share with you. Come away with me."

She stood in leaf shadows that could have been Chinese letters. He

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wanted to speak, to express his apprehensions, but his breath had so tightly coiled that if he had opened his mouth he would have screamed.

When she saw this, her pale smile tightened. "Just think about it," she whispered. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not a good idea to take you for myself and deprive you of everything familiar." She fitted the dark glasses to her face and nodded softly. "But I just had to try. Ain't love crazy?" She shrugged and strolled off among the incandescent trees.

He watched after her avidly, expecting some kind of starflash or pixel dissolve. She simply walked away and gradually blurred into the afternoon's pastels.

He sat on the park bench until sunset lay like a bloody pelt across the skyline. Then, he went home and got back to work with a fury.

The soccer ball had clarified for him the algebraic geometry necessary to segregate quantum chaos from data encoded in the qubit. Dedekind boundaries — the sets of real numbers that represented noise from the environment — possessed partitions like the white hexagons of a soccer ball. They fit together symmetrically, because every positive number correlated to a negative number. The infinity of positive numbers and the infinity of negative numbers canceled perfectly to zero. Those polynomials that did not cancel isolated themselves in the ideal defined by the Nullstellensatz — the soccer ball's black pentagon.

The conquest of zero had rolled to his feet as a soccer ball! Sitting on the floor of his spartan apartment, blond strands of sunlight in his upturned palms, he experienced fear puzzling together wedges of doubt and speculation: Would he have discovered his quantum error correcting code without the soccer ball? Why should he care? Would he have even noticed the soccer ball if she had not been there — she from Not-Yet?

He was drinking his third cup of coffee when she arrived. He was thinking how the darkness of the universe ferried light to Earth from distant galaxies and how light itself had no rest mass and so traveled free of time. At the speed of light, time stops. Yet, looking at the stars, we feel time with our eyes. What else is reality but what we see with our own eyes?

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Minnows of silver light schooled across the sunstruck walls, and when he looked over his shoulder, she was there. Fear and awe thronged in his chest. Like Arthurian lovers, their eyes brought them together, and he took hold of her hands, hands cool as silver. "Cup of coffee?"

While she sat beside him at his desk sipping her mug of coffee, he prepared the data files his employer required to create the qubit computer. "Suppose I don't send them?" he asked, his devilish donkey eyes glinting with mischief. "No qubit computer — no you."

"You still don't get it." She took another sip, her blue stare smiling through the steam. "It makes no difference whether or not you send your files. The future is already there." She put down the mug and stood up. "But if you don't transmit...." She shrugged, and he could see the throb of her heart in her throat. "You'll drink my tears. Time is precisely like space — it is immeasurably deep. There's plenty of room to make what we need where I come from. But there's only one you. When I fell in love, I fell a long way here to you. Yet, maybe you're not here for me. Maybe I have to climb back up that distance love falls — alone, without you, and rise above losing you and everything between us that is unfinished. Is that what you want?"

He sent the files.

She took him with her. Upon a blue noon under summer castle clouds in the crystal silence after a storm, he found himself iridescent, a spherical mirror, an unblinking presence of peace. She was with him, and everything sayable was said. Gleaming transparencies, they reflected each other, naked light, serene as angels.

A virtual face in hyperspace, he gazed upon the iridescent mirror of his beloved. No Sun illuminated them but radiance from within shining outward. The irreversible moment reflected off his own remembered face and the forgotten heartbreak of ugliness — the loneliness that had turned him inward to the Nullstellensatz, the conquest of zero — and eventually her, reflecting him reflecting her, a splintering of mirrors to infinity.

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In deep time, the accelerating expansion of the big bang had stretched the fabric of space to the Planck limit, to where the compact dimensions underlying the brane-structure of the universe floated like a herd of icebergs in the true vacuum. Atoms had long ago exploded, ruptured clockworks, protons and neutrons boinging into the void like sprung springs, eventually unraveling into quark triplets, and those, in turn, bursting open into the fractal horizons of the compact dimensions, which he had initially mistaken for summer cloud castles. They drifted like cumulus heaps, like mounded ice floes.

This is the universe's liminal extreme, he realized, reaching back to extract from his high school Latin the word *limen* — "threshold." At this liminal extreme of time, the event horizon of the Planck distance, which in his terrestrial life had been the foam texture of spacetime, each bubble as small as 10^{-33} centimeter, had expanded to floating immensities — chromatic pinnacles radiating virtual particles, ghost bosons and hadrons of the vanished universe bounding off each other in blue spectra.

Spacetime had actually vanished. Only the asymptotic reflection of it floated in the fractal surfaces of the enormously enlarged event boundaries to 5-space and beyond. Among those silver-blue mountains, he drifted with her.

Apparently, the heat death of the universe was much exaggerated, he laughed as they bobbled along the gravity gradients of reflected spacetime, where virtual particles seethed. They were themselves monopoles, singular points of positive magnetic charge around which flowed currents of exotic matter.

The knowledge of how these life forms had evolved in this outlandish environment shone in him on the far side of language. If he wanted to, he could inscribe it into speech. But his happiness was so huge and complete, it acquitted him of words.

Others like her lived in convoluted fractal crannies of the gigantically dilated Planck foam. They hovered in the blue emptiness like radiolarians — silver spheres, pyramids, and trapezohedra. Each existed as the descendents of artificial intelligences from distant worlds, distant times. They clustered like metallic roe, sharing uncommon histories and

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interpretations of reality. For as far as he could see, they floated sparkling — hot dust motes in the blue shine of vanished space — myriad prismatic geometries swarming among colossal cloudshapes at the end of time.

Her home wafted in this azure void, indistinguishable among the countless others. But her iridescent diatom, her congregation of artificial intelligences had a common ancestor on Earth. From here, she had reached back through time and had created him to create her — and to here, in this truncated icosahedron, this chrome-bright Buckyball, they had come to mingle their souls.

A boundless dream awaited him in that soccer ball at the end of the universe. The sphere hovered directly above the fractal cloudshapes that reflected the section of spacetime where the Milky Way had once pinwheeled. The actual fabric of spacetime embedding our galaxy had long since expanded into infinite dilution — yet, every single point of the galaxy's four-dimensional construct shimmered in those clouds near the chrome Buckyball. Every single point down to the ultimate granulation of Planck foam remained visible in that event horizon.

And there he was — his big donkey face staring at himself from the cumulus heap at the boundary of 5-space. As he glided toward those thunderheads, their contours resolved to a honeycomb of mirrors in whose cells an endless succession of more mirrors spiraled to infinity, each mirror filled with his big head and bristly hair, his long rabbit face gazing in dumbstruck wonder.

Don't look!

Did that warning come from her or from his startled mind?

Don't look at yourself! It's a regression loop....

Floating in the blue aft-continuum, on his way to a boundless dream in a silver Buckyball occupied by the last generation of intelligence in the universe, he panicked.

He understood that these swarming geometric colonies could view all prior time from the moment of the big bang to that instant when the runaway expansion of dark energy ripped spacetime apart. Yet, he was shocked to see his own stupefied face at the final instant before he left Earth to come here — to this placeless place at the end of everywhere.

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He understood that she and her kind could actually manipulate the pleated moments that wove the fabric of time. They could change the past. They could do this, because all of spacetime floated as a reflection in those cloudshapes. And those clouds were the boundary to higher dimensions. Realizations had begun to string together in his mind, forming a comprehension of how this was possible — and then he saw that startled face — that regression loop to his last instant on Earth — and dazedly he grasped that there is only one instant and that instant would never again be on Earth....

Don't look!

But he had looked. He had looked back at the world taken away. And the strangeness of where he found himself collapsed on him. For one moment, he yearned for the moment-ago, the farewell of it — it — an afternoon a hundred billion years ago at his computer keyboard with the Nullstellensatz and his human animal body and the flurry of the world outside his window and the seas and mountains and the seasons — all gone....

Not. Not gone. Not abandoned. In the shining democracy of time's emptiness, all moments remained intact. This he knew.

Time was like space. Exactly like space. He could reach out and touch any moment, even his last moment on a planet vaporized long ago by a solar wind itself blown to a dark cloud.

And with that thought, with that reckless desire to love the transience of his planet, the forever-gone grass blades, the expected wonder of sunset, and the heap of sunsets he had forsaken — desire opened like a trapdoor.

He stood alone in his room staring at a sunstruck wall, where minnows of silver light schooled — and were gone.

He blinked.

The memory of what had transpired at the far end of the universe dispersed like smoke from a wicked-out candle. His wish had come true. He was home.

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His mind, thoughtless and clear as a pail of water, tried to recall the many wondrous truths that had illuminated him. Nothing restored itself.

Nothing. Zero. The Nullstellensatz.

He had come back to his solitary apartment and his computer keyboard, the bridge from within his mind to the outside world. And his work waited for him here like a troll — and his loneliness like the troll's crazy hair.

He might have convinced himself his overworked brain had hallucinated everything about her. It all seemed so unreal. No evidence remained of her more than a dream or a delusion — until he saw on the table the white ceramic coffee mug from which she had drunk. When he took it in his hands and felt its heat, his soul crashed into the apartment.

The mug stayed hot. Hour by hour, it never cooled. Maxwell's demon. Some thermodynamic incubus possessed the mug, much as the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell had imagined in his infamous thought experiment of 1871.

For Maxwell, the haunted object was a box with a partition down the middle and a molecular door controlled by a demon that permitted only the fastest molecules to pass one way. Eventually, half the box chilled and the other half warmed.

Only demons can scorn entropy. *But why would a demon bother*? he wondered. *Aren't demons allies of entropy*?

He left the mug in the freezer. His thoughts scattered. He couldn't pull them back together, because he kept getting up every few minutes to open the freezer. The mug remained hot.

His humiliated hands ran through his bristly hair as if feeling for the brain hidden under there. He knew he should call someone. If he shared the impossible, he might be able to let go of these thoughts that could not be thought.

Eventually, he fell asleep on the floor beside the refrigerator. Sunrise flowed like blood over the windowsill.

When he pulled himself awake, he opened the freezer and found the

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mug woolly with smoke and just as hot. The ice cubes he had put inside it had melted. But delicate filigrees of nearby frost remained intact.

His knees unlocked. On the floor, he scrutinized the depth of field in the tiles. He traced his fingers over the patterns and pondered ways of exploiting the mug. Attached to a thermocouple — two dissimilar metal wires — the heat of the 90°C mug would produce a small voltage. He visualized a wire of bismuth telluride doped with selenium and another wire of antimony, a combination that could efficiently convert the mug's thermal energy and generate a current ample enough to power a tiny motor in a perpetual motion machine.

He would spin a toy clown's head carved with Isaac Newton's bewigged face cranking out tiny laughter in perpetual mockery of the second law of thermodynamics. Or he'd play "Stars and Stripes Forever" forever. By midmorning, he had recognized the scope and trajectory of a plan that could profoundly change the history of the world with a coffee mug.

Soon, however, he put aside all intentions of telling anyone about the mug — or the improbable story of its undiminishing heat. The authorities would take the mug and leave him with only his mad story as a memento of a hopeless love.

He began using the mug to keep his coffee warm. He drank from it copiously, hoping its prodigal heat might imbue him with some wider understanding. It didn't.

At night, he slept with it. Maybe its indefatigable energy would inform his dreams. Maybe he would meet her again in the lucid depths of his sleeping brain. But she wasn't there, only the usual absurd poltergeists haunting the aftermath of sleep, knocking from inside his skull with fragmentary news of unfulfilled ghosts.

Why didn't she come back for him?

Maybe — maybe she had never left. Time is like space. Exactly like space. But what about thermodynamics? Isn't time thermodynamic? Ice cream on a summer's day. A smoke ring fulfilling its resemblance to zero. What had cordoned off time from her coffee mug?

Not what. Who.

She.

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He didn't have the heart to name the feeling that the mug carried once he realized that she was using it to reach back to him from the future. Was the mug's obstinate heat her warmth — her love?

For a long time after that, it was enough to coddle the thing. Then, he became fearful he might break it. So, he swaddled it in bubble wrap and locked it away in a fireproof safe he set in the wall behind the refrigerator.

Weeks at a time, he never saw the miraculous mug. It was enough for him to know it was there — that she was there beyond the stars, beyond the crumbling of the stars.

Days rolled in as regular and inexorable as the surging horses of the sea. Ordinary days, under-extraordinary days full of mundane ferment possessed him and assured him life was not a dream.

He changed jobs, worked for a while on cryptography for a communications company, and then took a teaching position at a nearby university. He met new people. He tried to make friends, cherishing the notion that, if he bonded with the right person, he could share what had happened to him. He could reveal the mug.

The frustrations and irresistible desires of the people he met — desires for new experiences, precious things, other people (but never for him) — intrigued him only briefly. Inevitably, his friendships became boring, and he discarded them like half-eaten apples.

He got sick. Adrift all day in sleep, he woke feverish in the dark and wrestled a sweaty, muscular homunculus through the night. Days later, when he recovered, he realized that death fit him like a shoe, like a tailored suit that would hang empty in his closet long after he was gone.

Two years had passed since she had come for him, over seven hundred days, and the mug still felt hot. He carried its wonder on his shoulders more heavily than ever, hunched over, pondering what would happen when the warmth had wafted away from his corpse. Would the mug's flamboyant heat continue? When the Sun had exhausted its hydrogen and flared away, blasting the Earth to fugitive rubble, would the mug — or its shards — prevail? Would it glow infrared and immortal in the absolute cold of the void?

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Thoughts of mortality left him feeling all feathery inside. He removed the mug from its safe and slept with it several nights in a row. But that didn't diminish his anxiety about death.

An idea hummed softly in his brain. He could tell he was about to realize something. But thinking about anything since he had met her — reasoning through anything — had become a method of pain.

The miraculous world that he had experienced outside the illusion of time defeated logic. Now, rationality hurt, because he had known time as distance. Before, he had assumed reality was arbitrary and absurd. Thinking had been a way of inventing truth and making it do his work.

But if effects could create their own causes...and heat refused to disperse ...and time tilted precisely like space...then, reality was designed and not a dream at all but a map of before drafted from the schematics of after.

Sitting at a window bare of curtains and blinds, numb face brushed by sunset's fluent hair, he understood she would always dream after him. He was going down into darkness. Emptiness waited like an angel.

The Earth itself and the Sun — every star in the sky — on their way to that dark angel, crossed the distance of time without a word. Only people asked why. Dreaming after him, she had told him why. Yet, the answer was hard — and harder yet to remember.

He had been covetous of the mug's power, as if possessing it could make him something more than a lonely and mortal man. She had given him that chance — to be other than lonely and more than a mortal man. She had exposed the illusion of time and offered him reality naked.

But he had preferred truth dolled up in evanescence. His allegiance to the familiar — to his donkey-ugly face, to the gnawing growl of lawnmowers and the fragrance of cut grass, to the trillion little hallelujahs of life on Earth — had seduced him stronger than her love.

Sunset ebbed in the surf of time, and darkness soaking through the soft air revealed the real country of his allegiance: boundless empty space. He had no right to keep the supernatural mug for himself. He had to give it up before something happened to him and its cupful of infinity was overlooked and lost. Death had expectations.

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Chronocentric thinking. Watching fireflies bleeping in the vest pocket park down the alley outside his window and across the street, the thought haunted him that all along he had misunderstood the mug. It was not a memento of her love. That was chronological thinking.

His heart thumped.

She had given him a token from the future. He had to accept what that future wanted to make of him. He had assumed the authorities would take the mug away if he revealed it. But that was the gumption of a chronological assumption. Smug reasoning.

Night sat in the window and revealed hidden lives flowing below as taillights and headlights, blood and lymph of the city's dark body. The future had already changed every one of those lives forever.

The Moon climbed between the buildings and up the skyline like a queen in a gauze veil. By the time she squatted on the penthouse across the street, he had worked out several pliant and plausible ways to make a gift of the mug to the world.

Then, in the cocoon of light around the Moon, he recognized another possibility. The woman with the spider milk hair wanted him. With breath-held fear, he dreamed back to his first encounter with her: "If time is like space," he had immediately recognized, "then change is an illusion."

Her smile had cut his heart. "You understand!"

"Sure." That syllable had flown from him like tossing a shoe aside. He had thought then he was merely dreaming and everything she had said was weightless of implication. But now —

Now, the other shoe dropped. "There really is no change!" he said aloud. "Time is one eternal now in mosaic."

An opalescent idea illuminated the darkest crannies of his brain, where intuition permeated the membrane between inner and outer. Something other than change hauled him through the distances from one moment to the next.

Probability!

Moonlight curdled around him like milk gone sour. Sitting in that coagulated light, he realized there were many "Nows" — not as in the

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'many worlds' interpretation of quantum mechanics, where history forked with each quantum decision — but without paths, without forks, just probability, a haze of "Nows" like this moonlight.

The "Nows" with the highest probabilities actually occurred. Memory, history, fossil records, motion, thermodynamics — all appeared as clots of probability. And the mug that would not cool existed as many low probability "Nows" clotted out of the quantum haze of the universe by her — a scab healing over a wound.

That wound was the distance between him and her. She had reluctantly let him go, to live the terrestrial "Nows" for which he had so glibly abandoned her. He had returned to his life, to the existence she had created for him with the Nullstellensatz and the qubit computer that no longer needed him and the consolation of a mug that never cooled. With it, he could still be with her, not at the far end of time but right here on Earth. Together, they could change the world, dismantle reality. All the many "Nows" that could have existed without this holy mug would smear away in the probability fog as new, unexpected "Nows" coagulated.

Or —

"Or not," he thought aloud, grunting as he heaved the refrigerator away from the wall. "If you're not coming back for me, if you're forsaking me to this — this — what did you call it?" He spun the safe's combination lock. "This diurnal sculpture. This sunrise and sunset rock spinning in the void. If you're not coming back for me, it's only a dream. Why should I play along?"

He took the mug out of the safe and carried it in both hands through the dark apartment to the window. It glowed invisibly.

"Time does not exist," he whispered to the mug. "It is an illusion. Nothing. Zero." He upheld the hot mug to the night. "Reality is one. The endless one. Now." The white ceramic shone glossily with reflected city light. "One and nothing. You forever real — and me, an ephemeral thing, a dream, a figment of your imagination."

"Come back," he plaintively called to the few stars rattling above the city. "Come back for me. Please. Take me with you. I thought I belonged here. With the seasons. With the fragrant Earth. I made a mistake. Can't

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you forgive me? I want to live with you on the shores of infinity and all creation gone before."

He felt suddenly foolish talking to the night, waiting at his window attentively, alert for some furtive verdict. "Look, I don't want this mug. It doesn't belong in this 'Now' — not in this rabid world. You must know that. Aren't you the one who made us? You must know. This is a world of ambition without reason. All our enterprises are poisoned with greed. You must know that. What good can come of this cup? Answer me that. What good is freedom without purpose?"

The maroon night made no reply.

He sighed. She had reduced him to talking to himself, as if she expected him to finish his own meaning. "You created me," he said finally, not bitterly but defiantly, speaking in a hushed voice to the vehement silence beyond the seething street noise, "yet, even so — Do you hear me? Even so, I can do just as I please."

He released the mug, and as it fell, he thought, *Nothing is forever.*

The mug disappeared in the dark, then reappeared in a sheet of window light from the lower stories. It shattered in the alley. Shards spun across the concrete, clattered against the bricks of his building and the adjacent building, ricocheted — and slammed back together with a clack loud as a shut lock. Intact again, the mug rocked softly, dully shining far below, a shivering piece of Moon fallen to Earth.

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Join us now on a trip across the galaxy, compliments of one of the most sure-handed storytellers around. Mr. Haldeman's most recent novel, Camouflage, *has recently been serialized in the pages of* Analog *magazine and is due out soon in book form.*

Faces

By Joe Haldeman

I THINK THE UNIVERSE would have been a much finer place if space travel had stayed expensive. Then it would never have involved me. So now I get to spend two years of my life doing "social observation" on a planet where, stepping out without a spacesuit, you wouldn't live long enough to take a second breath.

Social observation by a draftee with a gun. You couldn't call it war, since these woogies were still killing each other with sticks when we arrived — and besides, nobody really wants to hurt them. We just want to find out whether they have anything worth taking.

I do the reals and read books about the old days, my great-grandparents' time, when they spent more to put two men on the Moon than we spend to keep ten battalions on ten worlds. I try to feel what they felt, but I can't get there. It's not very glorious: Step into the machine, step out on a woogie planet, try not to get into too much trouble, come back one month a year to spend your pay.

We call this one La-la Land, or just Lalande, because its star's real

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name was Lalande followed by some number. A sun with another sun pretty far away. Not much night, or none at all, for about half the year, which bothers some people. I grew up in Alaska, Sun all night in the summer, and also lived there while getting my highly useful degree in art history. For some reason that seems to have qualified me to become a heavy equipment operator. With a gun, one must add, and a big gun, on the heavy equipment, which I would call a tank if I didn't know it was a GPV(E), General Purpose Vehicle (Exploration). Which spends half its time in the motor pool with mysterious ailments.

My partner in this dubious enterprise is Whoopie Marchand, whose name may affect her demeanor, with another appropriate degree: library science. We both wish the other was a mechanic. Whoopie comes from Jamaica, and likes to keep the machine about ten degrees hotter than I would choose, and in our tiny space cooks food so spicy it makes my eyes water. So except for the fact that I prefer the company of men and can hardly understand a word she says, we were just made for one another.

The Lalandians are a little more like humans, or at least other Earth creatures, than most woogies. (I have an older cousin who served on Outback, where the natives are like big spiders with metal shells.) They have the right number of eyes and ears and nostrils and a tiny mouth-thing, but six arm/legs. Their body chemistry is so different from ours that they breathe chlorine along with their oxygen. The water that comes out of their wells would kill you in a second.

Their heads are long and squashed-looking, with batwing ears and a chin like an axe blade. Bright red slanted eyes with nictitating membranes, set in deep sockets. Not easy to love.

They look sort of like nightmare centaurs, but their front, with the chest and "arms" and head, isn't always pointed forward. When they want to, those arms become the hind legs, and their butts rise up into the air, and they can use their former hind legs as arms. It's a defense thing, since from a distance the butt looks like the head, with dark spots for eyes and ears and mouth, but it's just a fat-and-water storage organ. If something bites it off, they can regenerate it.

It's an evolutionary anachronism now; their ancestors killed off all the large predators when they became tool-users. The old guys were pretty

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fierce, too, evidently. Sabretooth centaurs with big claws. They're more or less settled down now, though.

Whoopie and I are part of X Group, engineers, and normally stay in the compound that overlooks the town Nula. It's the biggest town on the continent, with maybe ten thousand natives. Hard to get a count, though; they're nomadic, and most of them are just in town temporarily, buying and selling and anxious to get back on the road. They ride six-legged things that aren't mammals but look like big soft camels, going from one oasis to another on this dry dustball of a world.

They couldn't send me someplace where the natives had art, like Kelsey or Pakkra; that would be too sensible. They probably send mechanics there. The Lalandians seem kind of plain and pragmatic; they have crafts like weaving and pottery, but everything's utilitarian. There are subtle and beautiful color variations in some of their fired pots, but they seem to be incidental, perhaps accidental. They're close to colorblind anyhow, with those huge red eyes.

So I was surprised and pleased to get what looked like an art assignment; the coordinator said an orbital survey showed what looked like statuary in the Badlands north of here, and Whoopie and I were to go out and take its measure. They didn't choose Whoopie on the off chance that there might be a library out there; it's just that we had trained together on the GPV in South Dakota and Antarctica. And we did get along all right except for gender, culture, language, diet, and all. Did I mention that she smokes? I don't. For the past month or so, she and I had been out for a couple of hours a day, gathering geological specimens to send back to Earth. This was going to be a really long one, so I made sure she had lots of weeds and chili powder.

We went into town first, to take on water, which is always a bit of a driving challenge, since the Lalandians are fascinated by the GPV, which bears a superficial resemblance to their camel things, since it's bulbous and has six wheels. Their culture lacks the concept of being squashed like a bug, though, lacking heavy machinery, and it takes a delicate touch on the joystick to keep from running over the juvenile natives.

I'm glad to let Whoopie drive in town, since she's better at it and enjoys it. I sort of enjoy riding along hanging onto the side. The kids wave like human kids would. I'd throw them candy except carbohydrates would kill them.

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When we left the city limits, defined by a huge dirt wall, I swung inside through the doubledoor, took off the breather helmet, and seatbelted myself into the command seat. "Hey mon," Whoopie said.

"It's John," I said, not for the first time.

"Hey John. You smell like the chlorine dust."

"Go ahead." She lit up a clove-smelling weed. The airco cranked max on her side and sucked up most of it.

"You don' want one."

"Thanks, no." I thought about my own opie but couldn't slap that until I was off duty. She could smoke the clove thing because regulations lag behind reality.

The inside of the GPV was bigger than a civilian van, but full enough of stuff that it felt crowded. Two bunks and a galley in front of us, and a little head with a privacy curtain that only pulled halfway. Weapons station at the very rear. Chatterguns and a big pulse cannon in case you were bothered by something far enough away to use it. We'd trained on both back Earthside, but nobody had ever fired a shot on Lala. Probably a good thing. The chatterguns were almost as hard on the user as on the target, and the cannon could blow the front off the tank if you depressed it too far.

Whoopie put the thing on dumb auto and we studied the chart on the screen. There weren't any roads headed for the artifact.

"How the hell they build this thing?" Whoopie said. "Gotta be twice the size of Mount Rushmore. They had roads and like explosives and jackhammers for Rushmore."

I didn't know what Mount Rushmore was, but then I was never actually an American, not since Alaska seceded when I was six. Neither was Whoopie, of course, but Jamaica was an American protectorate and just a hop away. She went there all the time.

She saw my expression and explained. "Mount Rushmore's in one of those states like Idaho? The big square ones, I always get mixed up. They got four and a half presidents' heads carved in the side of a mountain." She closed her eyes, trying to remember. "Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln. One of the Roosevelts. Then they try to add someone from the twenty-first, Reagan or Bush, and it collapses. Just a triangle of hair and part of one eye left. It looks kinda like a cunt."

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I traced a possible route with my finger. "Maybe we should stay on this mesa? Just follow along the curve of the canyon lip."

She nodded. "Twice as long, but God knows what we get in the valley." Probably rubble, like leftover president chins. "You want to set it up, drive for a while?"

"Yeah, take a break." The weed usually made her sleepy. She went forward and scrunched into the sack.

I might have joined her if I was that way. She's kind of pretty. And we do like each other more than we let on.

I took the stylus and drew us a route that stayed along a level path, according to the elevation lines; an arc that went west and then north. That would be the default, in case I smoked a joint and fell asleep myself. But dumb auto won't go over five or six kays per hour. We'd run out of curry before we got there.

I shifted over and belted in and gave the dashboard a thumbprint and eyescan. Cranked it up to about fifty, sixty kays, bumpety bump.

"Don't you go too fast, mon," Whoopie mumbled.

"Sleep, my darling. I made Expert on this thing."

"Yah, that's what I mean. Be expert." I actually got ranked Expert on vehicles and weapons I'd never seen, let alone driven or shot. If you're not Expert all around, they can't send you off planet. So there you go.

The trough we were in was kind of like a broad dry creek bed, pebbles and rocks. Sometimes boulders you had to maneuver around. At that speed it didn't even take half a brain.

I used the other half to paint mental pictures. I'm not a bad artist — just not an especially good one — and the paintings I do in my head work out better than the ones on paper or canvas. I did Whoopie's face, half in darkness, mysterious. The African goddess of Annoying Normal People.

The main sun set after about an hour and a half, but there was enough light from the little one, I didn't have to pop an eyepill. They always make me sweat, go figure. After about three hours, though, the light was getting green and weak. Whoopie got up and suggested we take it easy for a while, let the little bastard rise up out of the mists near the horizon.

It was good to stop. The shock absorbers on the tank were marvels of engineering, I'm sure, but I still felt like a pair of dice finally come to rest.

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She'd soaked some dehydrated goat for a curry. Why did we take goat to the stars? It would never have occurred to me to eat one in the first place. She'd eat worms if they had curry and hot sauce on them, though in fact goat was big comfort food for her.

I did my usual escape, putting on a real and delaying my own dinner so I wouldn't have to share the smell of hers. I'd been on this one before, soaring like a condor over the Norwegian fjords in total winter, really like a bird, finding the weak thermals on the Sun side and sliding along them, thinking of nothing but flight. Enjoying the deadly cold. At least there was plenty of oxygen and no exotic spices.

When I came out of it the air was cold and curry-free. "I turned up the airco," Whoopie said. "Where'd you go?"

I told her. "I could try that."

"Thought you didn't like cold." I handed her the headset.

She nodded. "Like the birds, though." She settled into the pilot seat and turned it on.

I zapped some chicken stew and read while she soared: A survey of Spanish architecture, post-Gaudi. I had a monograph linked to it, distilled from my Ph.D. thesis, and there were two latent hits I'd have to check when I went back Earthside. Maybe a job offer, dream on.

It used to be that when you were drafted, the goddamned Confederación would make them keep your job for when you got back. That ended the year before I was offered the opportunity of service. I'll spend next month Earthside trying to line something up, but there seem to be about five art historians for every non-teaching job. I'll wind up in some cow college trying to keep a roomful of Eskimos and myself awake while I drone on about Doric and Corinthian columns.

The phone chimed and I thumbed it. The unlovely face of our immediate superior, Yobie Mercer. I sort of hated his tattoos, which looked amateur and self-inflicted. "Coordinator. What can I do for you?"

"You could start by telling me why your vehicle's not moving."

"It's dark. We took a break for chow and to wait for Junior to come up out of the mist."

"You have lights."

"With all respect, sir, the terrain is pretty uneven."

"It's not that bad. How far are you?"

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I looked at the chart and measured out about two inches. "It looks like about seventy klicks, sir. Three hours in the dark."

"Well, do it. I want you there by main dawn."

"Yes, sir." If they're in such a goddamned hurry, why don't they fly someone out? "We'll certainly try."

"You'll more than try, Denham. You'll be there. We have civilian press coming at 0800."

"Press, sir? From Earth?"

"Just do it." He clicked off.

"What was that all about?" Whoopie had the helmet off.

"Fearless Leader wants us there at dawn, big dawn. Something about press."

"Press this." She grabbed her crotch. "You wanta drive?"

"I'd as soon you did. If you're rested enough."

"Sure, no prob." We shifted around and belted in. She dimmed the inside lights and snapped on the outside floods. The vague landscape jumped into sharp relief, mostly jumbled gray rocks. The bright light brought out subtle shadings, ochre and gamboge and rust.

She opened the med kit and looked at the eyepills, but put them back. I wouldn't want them either, with the high contrast. She shook out a stimmy and put it under her lower lip. "Hang on, mon." She edged the joystick forward.

She was pretty good, keeping it around a hundred, slithering on the turns occasionally, but she really was better at it than I was. It wasn't her fault that the machine crapped out on us.

There was a sudden really ominous sound, like metal grinding while an electric arc sputtered, and the GPV(E) stopped E-ing with a vengeance. It juddered to a stop, I think with all the tracks and wheels locked. The dim interior lights and the external floodlight went dark. Junior was high enough that we could see a little, though.

"Shit!" Whoopie rattled the joystick around and stomped on pedals, to no effect, and then sat and listened. The machine creaked and popped. Smell of hot metal and ozone.

"Mercer's going to love this," I said.

She tapped on the screen. Nothing. "If and when he finds out about it. We're in real trouble, mon. John."

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"Try the suit radios?"

She nodded. "Better get into the suits, anyhow. I think we've got a leak." There might have been a little chlorine, masked by the ozone.

We stripped and helped each other into the suits, nice butt, and tried the airlock. We had to use the manual emergency levers, and the outside door stuck in the open position.

My heads-up said I had three and a half hours of air, normal activity. "Did you top off the spares?"

"Huh uh." I hadn't either. They had maybe four hours each, if nobody'd been at them.

I followed her around the tank to the other side. She opened the three access panels to the engine, transmission, and fuel cells. "There you go."

The fuel cell terminals were fused, still hot and smoking. "What could do that?" I said. "Something short them out?"

"I can't imagine what. Maybe something inside? Do you know how fuel cells work?"

"You're the big driver."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Calm down, calm down. It's just that you know more about cars and things."

"Ya, ya. You want to call Fearless Leader?"

"Not especially." But I tapped out the home-base sequence on my wrist plate. "Shit."

"Nothing?"

"Not even static. Something's really wrong."

She tried hers and it didn't work, either. She looked north and raised a hand as if to scratch her nose. It clanked against the helmet. "Damn. It's only a few kilometers more. We could walk to it."

"Leave the tank? Our food and water — "

"Which don't do any good, you can't take off the helmet. This press thing is going to be there at eight o'clock. There will be a chopper."

"It might just be a remote camera."

"Even so."

I sank back onto the tank's fender. "This can't all be happening at once."

"Ya, well, when was the last time you check the suit radios? Topped

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off the reserve oxygen?" She shook her head, though I could only see the gesture because I was looking directly into her helmet. "Or me. The motor pool don't check, they don't get a written order."

"Look, Mercer knew when we stopped last night. He'll know we've stopped now, and call. When he doesn't get an answer, won't he send a chopper out?"

"I don' think so. What's gonna send the signal we stopped, we ain't got power?" She looked at her watch. "Unless he bothers to call before Press Time, it'll be two hours before he knows somethin's wrong. Then how long before they start lookin'?"

Knowing Mercer, he might go off to breakfast with the reporter, especially if she was female. Then chat her up while we learn to breathe chlorine. "Okay. Let's carry the spare oxygen."

I started to get up and instead fell to the ground. We said "Shit!" in unison; the tank was starting to move on without us. Whoopie ran around to the airlock side, and I followed as soon as I could get to my feet.

She was inside, both doors open. I swung up and staggered in, too.

"Damn! Nothing!" She was working the joy stick with both hands. The tank continued to crawl along at a fast walk.

She leaned forward and looked at the dash. "I don' know what the hell. Where's it gettin' power?"

"Maybe it's some failsafe thing," I said. "A backup power supply. Is it following the default path?"

"I don't think so — Jesus! It's headed for the edge!" I popped open the cabinet next to the airlock and unshipped the two reserve oxygen tanks. Whoopie grabbed one and we both half-jumped, half-fell out of the door. We sat and watched the machine crawl toward its doom.

But at the edge, it slowly spun left and continued on its way. We got to our feet and followed it.

"It's not headed back," Whoopie observed. "So it's not some kind of homing program."

"And it's not following the default I traced. But it is headed roughly in the right direction."

"That's where it's goin'." She checked her wrist compass and almost tripped over a rock. "Might even be a more direct route." It certainly wasn't afraid of skirting the edge of the canyon, something I'd avoided,

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mapping with the stylus. Maybe it did have a kind of homing "instinct," but toward its destination, rather than back to the motor pool.

Keeping up with it was exhausting. The suits aren't uncomfortable in the short term, but they reminded me of when your mother overdressed you for playing in the snow: You walk kind of like a zombie in a movie. Very comical.

After stomping along for about an hour and a half, we topped a rise and could see the artifacts, which were impressive. Three identical Lalandian heads, maybe a hundred meters high. In another fifteen minutes, the GPV rolled as close to the artifacts as it could get, on the edge of a sheer cliff, and stopped.

It took us a while to get our breath, and it was about time to stop breathing so hard. My heads-up said 38 minutes left. We bled the spares into our tanks, which gave us a couple more hours.

"God damn," she said. "Whatta you make of it?"

"Been here a while. If they were on Earth I'd say they were thousands of years old. This atmosphere's more corrosive, though. Um...."

We had stared at them for several minutes, in silence, before either of us realized it was odd.

"John," she said, still staring.

"Yeah," I said. "This is crazy."

"Let's both look away now. On the count of three."

"Hell with counting. Just look away."

It was like not looking at a beautiful painting, combined with not looking at a horrible accident. I looked at my feet, and every muscle in my neck was trying to make me raise my head.

"This is max bad," she said, and I could tell from her voice that her teeth were clenched.

Some kilometers away, I could hear the throb of a helicopter. With some effort I was able to look in its direction. It was the big cargo one, good. It would have at least six oxygen tanks.

Then it stopped. It was going thump-thump-thump and then nothing. I saw it auto-rotate about halfway to the ground, and then it stabilized and continued toward our position.

But the engine wasn't going; the blades weren't turning. It was evidently magicked the way our tank had been.

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Whoopie and I lost interest in the chopper and stared back at the statues. They were a little more fascinating than anything I'd ever seen. When the helicopter landed next to us, we glanced at it, and then returned our attention to the three heads, ugly and compelling.

Mercer got out of the helicopter, followed by two Lalandians and another human, the newsie. Through her faceplate I could see she was beautiful. I looked back at the statues. I could hear Mercer breathing hard through the suit's external speakers.

"What is...," Mercer began. "What, um." He was staring at them, too.

One Lalandian was our translator, Moe. "I see it works on you, too," it said, lisping the esses and making a strange click-sound for the tees.

"What works?" the newsie mumbled.

"I told the Mercer. The three spirits."

"You said 'compelling.'" Mercer tried to look at the creature, but turned his attention back to the three.

"Are they not?"

Mercer didn't answer.

I tried to concentrate. "How old are they?"

"Who knows? Old."

The newsie cleared her throat. "Do you know, build, what? Wait." You could hear her take a deep breath. "Do-you-know-who-built-them?"

Moe said something in his own language and the other answered with a syllable.

"They've always been. They're not like a building."

I tried to close my eyes but couldn't. It seemed to be getting worse. "Long? How long?"

"I'm sorry?" it said.

"How...long-does-it-last?" Whoopie said.

"It has lasted, how you calculate, thousands of thousands of days."

Both of the Lalandians flipped, their tail ends in the air. They stared at each other almost nose to nose. "Many died here, starve and thirst, before we learned the way."

"Die here," Mercer said. "People stand here till they die?"

"Not people; not humans. You are the first to be here."

"You didn't tell me!"

"No. If I had told you, you would not have brought us out here. These

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two, John and Whoopie, would have died if they didn't know the way. We like them."

"The way?" I said. "That's what you're doing now?"

"Yes," Moe said, and the two of them started moving away, stepping in unison.

"Wait!" Whoopie said. "We can't...we can't walk with our butts in the air!"

"I think it's not the way you do it," Moe said. "It's who you are with. This is my mate," and he said her name, which sounded like a digestive emanation.

"None of us have mates," Whoopie said. "Not here."

"It only has to be someone you are...attracted to? You concentrate on him. If he is also attracted to you, you can both walk away."

"Oh my God," Whoopie said, and half turned toward me. "You don't like women."

"I'm here," Mercer said, tattoos and jowls and all. Whoopie's complexion turned a little gray and she shook her head slowly.

"Whoopie," I said softly. "Look at me." With a huge effort I stepped around, facing away from the statues. She took two steps toward me.

I stared into her weird blue eyes, so striking with her dark skin. Soft skin that I had to admit I'd wanted to touch. Her mouth opened slightly in an expression of surprise. "There's one woman I do like," I said.

"You have a funny way of expressing it." Our faceplates clicked together and she giggled and tried to put her arms around me. It was an awkward gesture in the clumsy suits, but unambiguous. The compulsion was suddenly gone, replaced by a more pleasant feeling. I returned her embrace, and we began to shuffle away.

"How far do we have to go?" I called to the Lalandians.

"Out of sight," Moe said.

"Wait!" the newsie shouted. "What the hell are we going to do?"

Good point. If I were in her position I'd be doomed. "How much air do you have?" They each had four hours.

"We can't carry them," Whoopie said. "Maybe her, but not him."

"They might fight it, too." We whispered out a plan, trying to ignore Mercer's pleading with the woman, which would have been funny if it weren't a life and death situation.

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We wound up waltzing back to the GPV, where we clumsily kicked open the front storage locker. There was a cable attached to a winch there. We managed to detach it and make a loop.

It served as a kind of lasso. We tried it on the woman first, looping it under her arms. She couldn't cooperate, but she didn't resist until we actually began to pull. She dug in and tried to stay, but after a couple of tugs she fell down. We dragged her as fast as we could, back down the rise that led to the ledge. After a couple of hundred meters, we reached the two Lalandians and she said she was okay. Whoopie and I were free to look at something besides each other.

"You're a funny guy," she mumbled, looking at her feet.

"Just versatile," I said, though it was not something I'd known about myself. I felt intensely confused, but not unhappy.

"So now you go back and get Mr. Popularity?" the newsie said.

We looked at each other and laughed. "Don't even think it," Whoopie said.

He was a little more trouble, heavy and ornery. Once he was safe, we still had to go back and collect four air tanks.

Of course we still weren't completely out of trouble. The Lalandians said they thought our radios would work when we were sufficiently far away, but then they didn't really know anything about radios; they were no more nor less magical than the statues.

We followed our GPV'S tracks back to where we'd lost control of it. A little way beyond, all of our radios started chattering. They had observed some of what was happening from orbit, and the commander of the Marine detachment was about to send an assault team after us, assuming the helicopter had been hijacked, though by whom and for what reason was not clear.

The Marines were soon replaced by platoons of scientists and engineers, working in carefully chosen pairs.

Whoopie and I were glad to leave the service the next year, resisting a fairly sizable reenlistment bonus in exchange for a degree of sanity. Ten years later, we're still together, with a normal kid and fairly normal jobs. As far as we know, the Lalande Effect is still a mystery.

In a universe that's full of mysteries, some of them wonderful. ☙

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Just returned from a trip to South Africa, Kit Reed reports that her new novel, Thinner Than Thou, *will be out shortly here in the US. Her latest story for us gives us a new and wholly unexpected look at the undead.*

The Zombie Prince

By Kit Reed

WHAT DO YOU KNOW, FOOL, all you know is what you see in the movies: clashing jaws and bloody teeth; raw hunger lurching in to eat you, thud thud thud.

We are nothing like you think.

The zombie that comes for you is indifferent to flesh. What it takes from you is tasteless, odorless, colorless, and huge. You have a lot to lose.

The incursion is gradual. It does not count the hours or months it may spend circling the bedroom where you sleep. For the zombie, there is no anxiety and no waiting. We walk in a zone that transcends disorders like human emotion. In the cosmos of the undead there is only being and un-being, without reference to time.

Therefore your zombie keeps its distance, fixed on the patch of warmth that represents you, the unseemly racket you make, breathing. Does your heart have to make all that noise, does your chest have to keep going in and out with that irritating rasp? The organs of the undead are sublimely still. Anything else is an abomination.

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Then you cough in your sleep. It is like an invitation.

We are at your bedroom window. The thing we need is laid open for us to devour.

For no reason you sit up in bed with your heart jumping and your jaw ajar: what?

Nothing, *you tell yourself, because you have to if you're going to make it through the night.* Just something I ate.

Hush, if you enjoy living. Be still. Try to be as still as me. Whatever you do, don't go to the window! Your future crouches below, my perfect body cold and dense as marble, the eyes devoid of light. If you expect to go on being yourself tomorrow when the Sun comes up, stay awake! Do it! This is the only warning you'll get.

One woman alone, naturally you are uneasy, but you think you're safe. Didn't you lock the windows when you went to bed last night, didn't you lock your doors and slip the dead bolt? Nice house, gated community with Security patrolling, what could go wrong? You don't know that while you sleep the zombie seeks entry. This won't be anything like you think.

Therefore you stumble to the bathroom and pad back to your bedroom in the dark. You drop on the bed like a felled cedar, courting sleep. It's as close as you can get to being one of us. Go ahead, then. Sleep like a stone and if tonight the zombie who has come for you slips in and takes what it needs from you, tomorrow you will not wake up, exactly.

You will get up. Changed.

WHEN DEATH COMES for you, you don't expect it to be tall and gorgeous. You won't even know the name of the disaster that overtakes you until it's too late.

Last night Dana Graver wished she could just bury herself in bed and never have to wake up. She'd rather die than go on feeling the way she does.

She wanted to die the way women do when the man they love ends it with no apologies and no explanation. "I'd understand," she cried, "if this was about another girl." And Bill Wylie, the man she thought she loved — that she thought loved her! — Bill gave her that bland, sad look and said unhelpfully, "I'm sorry, I just can't do this anymore."

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Her misery is like a bouquet of broken glass flowers, every petal a jagged edge tearing her up inside. She would do anything to make it stop. She'd never put herself out — no pills, no razor blades for Dana Graver, no blackened corpse for Bill to find, although he deserves an ugly shock.

She'd never consciously hurt herself but if she lies on her back in the dark and *wills* herself to die it might just accidentally happen, would that be so bad? Let the heartless bastard come in and find his sad, rejected love perfectly composed, lovely in black with her white hands folded gracefully and her dark hair flowing, a reproach that would haunt him for the rest of his life. *Look what you did to me.* Doesn't he deserve to know what it sounds like to hear your own heart break?

Composed for death, Dana dozes instead. She drops into sleep like an ocean, wishing she could submerge and please God, never have to come back up. She....

She jerks awake. *Oh God, I didn't mean it!*

There is something in the room.

With her heart hammering she sits up, trembling. Switches on the light.

The silent figure standing by the dresser looks nothing like the deaths a single woman envisions. No ski mask, so this is no home invasion; no burglar's tools. It isn't emblematic, either, there's no grim reaper's robe, no apocalyptic scythe. This isn't SARS coming for her and it isn't the Red Death. The intruder is tall and composed. Extremely handsome. Impeccable in white. The only hint of difference is the crescents of black underneath the pale, finely buffed fingernails.

She shrieks.

In ordinary incursions the victim's scream prompts action: threats or gunshots or knife attack, the marauder's lunge. This person does nothing. If it is a person. The shape of the head is too perfect. There is something sublime in its unwavering scrutiny. Chilled, Dana scrambles backward until she is clinging to the bedstead. She throws the lamp at it, screaming. "Get out!"

It doesn't move. It doesn't speak.

There is only the crash as the glass lamp-base shatters against the wall behind the huge head. The light itself survives, casting ragged shadows on

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the ceiling. The silence spins out for as long as Dana can stand it. They are in stasis here.

When she can speak, she says, "What are you doing here?"

Is it possible to talk without moving your lips? The stranger in her room doesn't speak. Instead, Dana knows. Uncanny. she *knows.*

—Good evening. Isn't that what you people say?

She does what you do. She opens her throat and screams to wake the dead.

—Don't do that.

"I can't help it!"

—I'm sorry. I'm new at this.

"Who are you?"

—You mean the name I used to have? No idea. It left me when I died....

"Died!"

The intruder continues **—and I would have to die again to get it back, and you know what death brings. Dissolution and decay. Sorrow.**

"*What* are you?"

—For the purposes of this conversation, you can call me X. Every one of us is known as X.

"Oh my God. Oh, my God!"

The great head lifts. **—Who?**

"Get out." Higher. Dana sends her voice high enough to clear the room and raise the neighborhood. "Get out!" When she uncovers her face the intruder hasn't advanced and it hasn't run away.

It hasn't moved. It is watching her, graceful and self-contained. As if her screams are nothing to it. **—No.**

"Get out or I'll.... " Groping for the empty pistol she keeps under the pillow she threatens wildly. "I'll shoot!"

—Go ahead. So calm. Too calm! **—It won't change anything.**

"Oh." Noting the fixed, crystalline eyes, she understands that this is true. "Oh my *God.*"

The bedroom is unnaturally still. So is the intruder. Except for the trembling Dana can't control, except for her light, irregular breathing, she too manages to stay quiet. The figure in white stands without moving, a monument to patience. There is a fixed beauty to the eyes, a terrifying lack

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of expression. They are empty and too perfect, like doll's eyes: too pale to be real, blue as blown flowers with stars for pupils. **—Don't be afraid. That won't change anything either.**

Dana isn't afraid, exactly, she is too badly hurt by the breakup with Bill to think much about anything else, and this? What's happening here in her bedroom is too strange to be real. It's as though she is floating far above it. Not an out-of-body experience, exactly, but one in which everything changes.

The intruder is impeccable in a white suit, black shirt, bright circle of silver about one wrist — silver wire braided, she notes in the kind of mad attention to detail that crisis sparks in some people. The rapt gaze. Like an underground prince ravished by its first look at the Sun. The attention leaves her more puzzled than frightened. Flattered, really, by that gaze fixed on her as if she really matters. As if this strange figure has come to break her out of the jail that is her life. Bill's betrayal changed her. She was almost destroyed but even that is changing.

She can't forgive Bill, but with this magnetic presence in her room, for seconds at a time she almost forgets about Bill.

The dark hair, the eyebrows like single brush strokes, the pallor are eerie and sinister and glamorous. She doesn't know whether to flirt or threaten. Better the former, she thinks. *Let Bill come in and find us, that will show him.* Unless she's stalling until her fingers can find bullets and load the gun. As if she could make a dent in that lustrous skin. "What is this?" she asks, overtaken. "Why are you here?"

The answer takes too long coming. It is not that the stranger has stopped to choose its words. It exists without reference to time. When the answer comes, it isn't exactly an answer. **—You are my first.**

"First what?" First what, she wonders. First love? First kill? The stranger is so gorgeous standing there. So courteous and so still. Impervious. None of her fears fit the template. If Dana's clock is still running, she can't read the face. Unnerved by the absence of sound — this intruder doesn't shift on its feet, it doesn't cough or clear its throat; she doesn't hear it breathing! — she whispers, "What are you?"

—Does the word undead mean anything to you?

"No!" It doesn't. Nice suit, cultivated manner, he's a bit of a mystery, but the handsome face, the strange, cool eyes lift him so far out of the

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ordinary that the rules don't pertain here. He's here because he's attracted to her. "You don't look like a...."

—Zombie?

Then it does! Images flood the room, blinding her to everything but the terror. Dana flies out of bed, rushing the door, ricocheting off the stranger's alabaster facade with her hands flying here, there. Screaming, she hurls herself at the sealed bedroom window, battering on the glass.

—Or walking dead.

"No!" A zombie.

—If you prefer.

This is a zombie. "No, no! Don't. Don't touch me!"

—Hold still. It has an eerie dignity. **—I'm not going to eat you.**

Idiot human. If you're afraid of getting your face gnawed off or your arm ripped out of its socket and devoured, you've seen too many movies. Your body is of no interest to us, not me, not any. We don't hunt in packs nor do we come in pairs. The zombie travels alone and the zombie takes what it needs without your knowing it. What I take can be extracted through the slightest opening; a keyhole, the crack under your bedroom door. Like a rich man the morning after a robbery, you may not even know what is missing.

"Don't." Sobbing, Dana retreats to the bed, pulling the covers up in a knot. All her flailing, her failed attempts to escape, all that screaming and the intruder hasn't advanced a fraction of an inch. So calm and so very beautiful. In a way it's everything she wants, she thinks, or everything she wants to be. Unless it's everything she's afraid of. She is a tangled mass of conflicting emotions — grief and terror and something as powerful as it is elusive. "What do you want?"

—Zombies do not want. They need.

"You're not going to...." She locks her arms across her front with an inadvertent shudder.

—Do you really believe I want to chew your arm off?

"I don't know what I believe!" This is not exactly true. In spite of what it says, Dana is afraid it's here to devour her. *Doesn't have to be me*, she thinks cleverly. Odd what rejection does to you; her heart congeals like a

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pond in a flash freeze. Why not pull a switch and buy her safety with a substitute? In a vision of the fitness of things she sees Bill broken in two for his sins; she hears Bill howling in pain as the zombie's pale, strong hands plunge into his open chest, and when this happens? Maybe she and her elegant zombie will make love while Bill dies and that'll show him, that will damn well show him. "If you want to eat," she says in a low voice, "I can feed you."

—If that was what I came for you'd be bare bones by now.

She does what you do in ambiguous situations. She asks a polite question. "How.... How did you get this way?"

—No idea. Zombies do not remember.

This brings Dana's head up fast. "Nothing?"

—No.

Thoughtfully, she says, "So you don't remember how it happened."

—No. Nothing from before. The silence is suddenly empty, as though the thing in her bedroom has just walked out and closed the door on itself.

Nothing, it is the nature of our condition. There was a name on my headstone when I got up and walked, but I had no interest in reading it. There was this silver bracelet on my wrist that must have meant something to me once. Engraving inside, perhaps, but I don't need to read it. Who gave it, and what did I feel for her back when I was human? Human I'm not. There is no grief in the zone where I walk. There is no loss and no pain, and yet....

I came out of the grave wiped clean. I came out strong and powerful and insentient. Yet there is this great sucking hole at my center. It burns. I need. I need....

What?

"But all this time you've been dead. I mean, undead. You must be starved." Clever Dana's fingers creep toward the phone. She can't imagine what she needs to say to please him. "I can get you somebody. Somebody big. Practically twice my size."

—No thank you.

"Really." All she has to do is tell the bastard she's OD'd on sleeping pills. Guilt will have him here in a flash. "Tall. Overweight." Fat, she

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thinks, Bill is fat and now that she thinks about it, probably unfaithful. "Fleshy. Just let me make this call."

—You don't understand. Terrifying but beautiful, in a way, the flat blue gaze. That grave shake of the head. **—Flesh is anathema to us.**

Idiot woman, do you imagine I came here to feed? Flesh-eating monsters may be out there, botched lab experiments or mindless aberrations created by toxic spills, but they are only things *without souls, with no sense of outcomes, and this is the difference between them and us.*

When you have been dead and buried, outcomes are everything to you.

Eat and the outcome is inevitable. Gorge on flesh — take even one bite! — and it all comes back: life, memory and regret, rapid, inexorable decay and with it, an insatiable desire for the fires of home.

Gnawing anxiously at her lower lip, Dana is too distracted to feel her teeth break the skin. She sees the intruder's eyes shift slightly. They are fixed not on her throat, but on her mouth. She shakes her head, puzzled. "You're really not hungry?"

—When you have been dead and buried, mortal concerns are nothing to you.

"So you really don't have to eat."

—If we do we lose everything.

"But when you die you lose everything," she says, shivering.

—If you mean little things like pain and memory, yes.

This brings Dana's head up. "Nothing hurts?"

—Nothing like that. No.

"Wait," she says carefully. "You don't feel anything?"

—We are above human flaws like feeling....

"And you don't remember anything. Oh. Oh!" The truth comes in like a highway robber approaching in stages. She says in a low voice, "I can't imagine what that's like."

—... and mortality.

Her breath catches and her heart shudders at the discovery. Her hand flies to cover it. "Oh," she cries. "Oh!"

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Easy. This is easy. Greedy, vulnerable girl. I knew you before you saw this coming. Who wouldn't want to forget and who doesn't love oblivion? Who would risk all that for a scrap of meat, the taste of blood? Knowing flesh can destroy us.

Topple and your former self comes back to you. All the love and pain and terror and excitement and grief and intolerable suspense that come with mortality. All you want to do is go home. You want to go home!

Aroused and terrified, you set out. With your restarted heart thudding, you approach the house. Burning to rejoin the family. Walk into the circle: am I late? *as though nothing's happened. Do not expect to find them as you left them. You have changed too. Are changing as your body begins to decay — too fast, all that lost time to make up for.*

It will be harsh.

Do not imagine that — wherever you come from, no matter how sorely you are missed — they will be glad to see you. Didn't they drop dirt and roses on your coffin a dozen years ago when they put you away? They sobbed when you slipped into a coma and fell dead, no cause the doctors could find, so sad. They loved you and begged God to bring you back to them, but they didn't mean it.

Not like this.

Your body is no longer in stasis. You are in a footrace with decay. The changes begin the minute your heart resumes beating so hurry, you are on fire. If only you can see them again! Hurry. Try to make it home while they can still recognize you! You will decompose fast because, face it, you died a long time ago. You've been around too long. In the end, you'll die again, and the family? Look at them sitting around the supper table in the yellow light, photo of you on the mantel, pot roast again. God in His heaven and everything in its place. Do you really want to blunder in and interrupt that?

You should hang back, but now that you remember, now that you feel, *you are excited to see them, you can't wait! Be warned, nothing is as you remember. Not anymore. With your arms spread wide in hopes you will surge out of the darkness, incandescing with love, but do not be surprised when they run screaming. Your loving face is a terror, your gestures are nightmarish, they are horrified by the sounds you make, your heartfelt cries that they can't quite decipher bubbling out of your rotting face.*

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Pray to God that your home is so far away that you won't make it even though you are doomed to keep going. Sobbing, you will forge ahead on bloody stumps, heading home until the bones that hold you up splinter and you drop. Now hope to God that what's left of you decomposes in a woods somewhere, unseen by the loved ones you're trying so desperately to reach. You need to see them just once more and you need it terribly, but be grateful that they are spared this final horror. You will die in the agonizing return of memory, and you will die weeping for everything you've lost.

TIME PASSES. The silence is profound. It is as though they are sharing the same long dream. Certain things are understood without having to be spoken. At last Dana snaps to attention. Like a refrigerator light set to go on when the door opens, the handsome figure in her bedroom remains motionless, with its great hands relaxed at its sides and crystal eyes looking into something she can only guess at. Alert now, excited by the possibilities, Dana tilts her head, regarding him. Carefully, she resumes the catechism. "You don't feel anything?"

—**Nothing.**

She studies the beautiful face, the graceful stance. Absolute composure, like a gift. She says dreamily, "That must be wonderful."

Some time during the long silence that has linked them, she stopped thinking of the zombie who has come for her as an it. This is a man, living or dead or undead, a beautiful man in her room, and he is here for her. Without speaking he tells her, —**When you have been dead and buried there is no wonderful...**

"I see." Not sure where this is going, Dana touches her Speed Dial. On her cell phone, Bill has always been number One. Her zombie notes this but nothing in his face changes. If he hears the little concatenation of beeps and the phone's ringing and ringing cut short by Bill's tiny, angry "What!" it makes no difference to him. When she's sure Bill is wide awake and listening Dana opens her arms to the intruder, saying in a new voice, "But we can still...."

—**...and no desire...**

"But you're so beautiful." She expects him to say, *So are you.*

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—...looks are nothing to you...

"That's so sad!" The phone is alive with Bill's angry squawking.

—because you never change.

"Oh!" This makes her stop and think. "You mean you never get old?"

—No.

For Bill's benefit she continues on that same sexy note. Oddly, it seems to fit the story that's unfolding. "And nothing hurts...."

—And nothing hurts.

Far out of reach, Bill shouts into the phone. "Dana...."

As Dana purrs like a tiger licking velvet. "But everybody wants."

—Zombies don't want. They need.

She is drawn into the rhythm of the exchange, the metronomic back and forth. God he is handsome, she would like to run her hands along that perfect jaw, down the neck and inside the shirt collar to that perfect throat. "And you need...."

Without moving he is suddenly too close. She sees green veins lacing the pale skin. **—Something elusive. Infinitesimal. You won't even miss it. And when it's gone....**

"Dammit, Dana!"

"But when it's gone...."

—You will be changed.

"Changed," she says dreamily, "and nothing will hurt anymore."

—When you have been dead and buried pain is nothing to you.

"Will I be like you?"

—In a way.

She says into the growing hush, "So I'll be immortal."

—In a way.

There is an intolerable pause. Why doesn't he touch her? She doesn't know. He is close enough for her to see the detail on the silver bracelet; he's next to the bed, he is right *here* and yet he hasn't reached out. Unaccountably chilled as she is right now — something in the air, she supposes — Dana is drawn. Whatever he is, she wants. She has to have it! Her voice comes from somewhere deep inside. "What do you want me to do?"

His cold, cold hand rises to her cheek but does not touch it. **—Nothing.**

"Are we going to, ah...," Dana's tone says, *make love*. She is distantly aware of Bill Wylie still on the phone, trying to get her attention.

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"Dana, do you hear me?"

"Shut up, Bill. Don't bother me." She wants to taunt him with the mystery. She doesn't understand it herself. She wants to make love with this magnetic, unassailable stranger; she wants to *be* him. She wants him to love her as Bill never did, really, and she wants Bill to hear everything that happens between them. She wants Bill Wylie to lie there in his outsized bachelor's bed listening as this seduction unfolds, far out of sight and beyond his control — Bill, who until last night she expected to marry and live with forever. Let this night sit in Bill's imagination and fester there and torture him for the rest of his life. Whatever she does with this breathtaking stranger will free her forever, and Bill? It will serve him right. "Come take what you want."

"Damn it to hell, Dana, I'm coming over!"

—When you have been dead and buried you do not know desire.

Yet there is a change in the air between them.

The mind forgets but the body remembers. Bracelet glinting on my arm. What's the matter with me? *Zombies know, insofar as they know anything, that you extract the soul from a distance. Through a keyhole, through a crack in a bedroom window. Always from a distance. This is essential. This knowledge is embedded: Get too close and you get sucked in. And yet, and yet! It is as though the bracelet links X to the past it has no memory of. Interesting failure here, perhaps because this is its first assault on the precincts of the living. Zombies come out of the grave knowing certain things, but this one is distracted by unbidden reminders of the flesh, the circle of bright silver around the bone like a link to the forgotten.*

"Then what," Dana cries as destiny closes in on her; she is laughing, crying, singing in a long, ecstatic giggle that stops suddenly as all the breath in her lungs — her *soul* — rushes out of her body and into his, along with the salty blood from her cut lip, the hanging shred of skin. "What will you take?"

—Everything.

Dana...can't breathe...she doesn't have to breathe, she.... Lifeless, she slips from his arms as her inadvertent lover — if he is a lover — staggers

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and cries out, jittering with fear and excitement as emotion and memory rush into him. Shuddering back to life, he will not know which of them performed the seduction.

"Oh my God," he shouts, horrified by the sound of his own voice. "Oh my *God.*"

That which used to be Dana Graver does not speak. It doesn't have to. The word is just out there, shared, like the air Dana is no longer breathing.
—Who?

My God, my God *I am Remy L'Hereux and I miss my wife so much! My beautiful Elena. For my sins, I was separated from my soul; I lost everything I care about. For my sins I was put in the grave and for my sins, my empty body was raised up, and what I did that was so terrible! I ran away with the* hounfort's *daughter. We met at Tulane, we fell in love and believe me, I was warned! My Elena's father was Hector Bonfort, they said, a doctor they said, very powerful. A doctor, yes, I said, but a doctor of what? And without being told I knew, because this was the one question none of them would answer. I should have been afraid, but I loved Elena too much. I went to her house. I told him Elena and I were in love. Hector said we were too young, fathers always do. I said we were in love and he said I would never be good enough for her, so we ran away. I laughed in his face and took her out of his house one night while he was away at a conference.*

Elena left him a note: Don't look for us, *she wrote.* We'll be back when you accept Remy as your own. *The priest begged us to reconsider; he warned us. "You have made a very grave enemy, and I...." He was afraid. We went to City Hall and the registrar of voters married us instead. Silver bracelet for my darling instead of a ring. Hector did not swear vengeance that I heard, but I knew he was powerful. Nobody ever spelled out what he was. I knew, but I pretended not to know. Elena and I were so much in love that I took her knowing he would come for me. God, we were happy. God, we were in love.*

Elena, so beautiful, with her whole heart and soul showing in her face, we were so happy! But we should have known it was not for long. When Jamie came he was the image of both of us. Our little boy! The three of us were never happier than we were in New York, as far from New

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Orleans as we could go. I couldn't stay at Tulane, not with Hector turned against me. In New York, we thought we could be safe. There are always flaws in plans cobbled out of love. Hector found out. Then he...it! Something came for me. I got sick. I fell into a coma, unless it was a trance. I didn't know what was happening, but Elena did. She prayed by my bedside. She cried.

We were torn apart by my death, I could hear her sobbing over my bed in the days, the weeks after I fell unconscious but I couldn't reach out and I couldn't talk to her. I heard her sobbing in the room, I heard her sobbing on the telephone, I heard her begging her father the hounfort *to come and release me from the trance. I tried to warn her but I couldn't speak.* Whatever you do, don't tell him where we are. *Then I felt Hector in the city. On our street. In my house. Deep inside my body where what was left of me was hiding. I felt the intrusion, and that before he ever came into my room. It was only a matter of time before his hand parted me down to the center, and I was lost. I was buried too deep to talk but I begged Elena:* Don't leave me alone! *Then Hector was in the room and in the seconds when Elena had to leave us alone — our son was crying, Jamie needed her, she'd never have left me like that if it hadn't been for him — when Elena left I felt Hector approaching—not physically, but from somewhere much closer, searching, probing deep. Reaching into the arena of the uncreated.*

Elena came in and caught him. "Father. Don't!"

"I wasn't doing anything."

"I know what you were doing. Bring him back!"

"I'm trying," he said. It was a lie.

Then he put his ear to my mouth, his ear *and my God with the sound of velvet tearing, my soul rushed out of me. "Father," Elena cried and he thumped my chest with his big fist: CPR. Then he turned to her.*

"Too late," he said. "When I came in Remy was already dying."

She rushed at him and shoved him aside. Before he could stop her she slipped her silver bracelet on my wrist. I was almost gone but I heard her sobbing, "Promise to come back."

The grief was crushing. It was almost a relief to descend into the grave with my love's tears still drying on my face and the bracelet that bound us rattling on my wrist, forgotten. Until now. My God, until now!

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What have I done?

I was better off when I was no more than a thing, *like that beautiful, cold woman rising from the bed but it's too late to go back. Where I felt no pain and no desire, desire is reawakened.*

I want to go home!

I have to go home to Elena, the love of my soul, and I want to see Jamie, our son. I miss them so much, but I can't! I have been dead and buried and I am different. I would give anything to see them but for their protection, I have to stay back. Elena wants to see me again, but not like this. The hand I bring up to my face is redolent of the grave and when I open my mouth I taste the sweet rot rising inside of me.

I can't go back to them, not the way I am,

I won't.

But need devours me. I have to see them again! With the return of life comes the compulsion. Better to throw myself in front of a train or rush into a furnace than do this to the woman I love. I know what's happening, the creeping decay spreads within because when you have been dead and buried, death races to catch up with you.

I can't go home. I have to stop. I have to stop myself. I....

The creature on the bed does not speak. It doesn't have to.

—Have to go home.

I have to go home. In a return of everything that made him human — love, regret and a terrible foreboding and before any of these, compulsion — in full knowledge of what he has been and what he is becoming, Remy L'Hereux turns his back on the undead thing on the bed, barely noting the fraught, anxious arrival of Billy Wylie, who has no idea what he's walking into.

That which had been Dana Graver sits up, its eyes burning with a new green light and its pale skin shimmering against the black nightgown.

—Then go.

I have to.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Final Shush!

"But the little-known secret behind the Queens success story is that its libraries are thriving because they have moved beyond books and the age-old dictum of silence is golden. So expect very little shushing."

— Dean E. Murphy, "Moving Beyond 'Shh' (and Books) at Libraries," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2001.

I HADN'T done a reading at a library in ages. That's why the invitation in my hand — from one Micah Hobblewight of the Queens library system — struck me so sharply.

I had almost forgotten that libraries existed.

With the Internet making it possible to accomplish much of my necessary writing research from home, and with Amazon and eBay and ABE Books offering access to practically any title I wanted to purchase and read, I hadn't actually set foot in a library in possibly five years. I wasn't particularly proud of this fact. It was just the way things were.

But the more I thought about my neglect of libraries, the more chagrined I grew. All my childhood affection for these repositories of literary adventure and excitement rushed back over me, reproving me for my subsequent delinquency. Wandering the stacks redolent of the slow decay of paper. Rummaging through the cart of discards. The periodical room with its legions of elderly, homeless, and poor killing time on a winter's day over the newspapers of distant cities, soothed by the jets of steam radiators. A cushioned nook in the children's room.

How had I forgotten all these immemorial pleasures?

And then there was the role libraries had played in my adult life. Thirty years ago, when I was just starting my writing career, libraries were some of the easiest

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places where one could arrange a reading. Librarians seemed eager to accommodate even fledgling writers. They worked hard to publicize your event, and had always read your book and would converse intelligently about it.

Certainly I owed libraries and librarians a lot. I resolved instantly to agree to do this reading. The invitation lacked an e-mail address for reply, so I dashed off a quick old-fashioned note to Hobblewight, managed to dig up an actual stamp and envelope from the bottom of a junk drawer, and entered the date on my calendar.

The day of my reading I stood outside the proper branch of the Queens library, carrying a copy of my latest novel, which I would read from and later donate to the library. This branch was not one I had ever patronized before, so I had no special fond memories of it. But its impressively old-fashioned columned frontage resembled that of my childhood library closely enough that I was instantly suffused with a golden nostalgia. Eagerly I bounded up the steps and through the front door, anticipating the rush of book smells, the dusty radiance filtering through grimy skylights, and even the admonitory shushing of the corps of matronly librarians intent on preserving the sacred silence so vital to bibliophiles.

I nearly knocked down a clown standing just inside the entryway. In full makeup and costume, the clown was handing out balloons to a gaggle of shrieking children. The colorful balloons were imprinted with a message: LIBRARIES ARE FUN-TASTIC!

Well, I supposed the new generation of readers had to be recruited somehow. And as long as such flackery and hype were limited to the lobby, there was no harm done, I guessed.

I approached the front desk. The young woman behind the counter sported hacked-off hair dyed all the colors of the aurora borealis, as well as several intimidating piercings. The small knob jutting below her lower lip she sucked on like some metallic pacifier, giving her an air of aggressive contrition.

I told her my name and announced that I was here for my reading. Looking at me askance, she consulted her Palm Pilot.

"Sorry, you're not on my schedule."

"But this is the correct time and date," I protested. "I have the invitation right here, from Micah Hobblewight."

She studied the letter. "No such

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person works here as far as I know."

"But this is impossible. Can I speak to the head librarian?"

She pushed up the fishnet false sleeves on her arms like a bouncer getting ready to eject an unruly drunk. "I'm the head librarian. And we call ourselves 'informatics and activities coordinators' these days."

Baffled, I sought for some final thread to hang onto. "What about this room number where I'm supposed to be?"

She glanced again at the invitation. "That's in the sub-sub-sub-basement."

"How do I get there?"

"Just follow the signage to the elevators."

I left the unhelpful Informatics and Activities Coordinator behind and headed across the lobby and toward a door featuring the elevator sign and an arrow. Curiously enough, muted strains of bouncy music emanated from what I had assumed would be a quiet reading room. Just as I warily crossed the threshold, I was snatched up by a woman who urged me lustily to "join the dance!"

At first I thought I had stumbled onto some kind of bacchanal involving whirling dervishes who had stormed the library and taken over. But after a few quick turns across the marble dance floor, I realized that I had been swept up in some sort of library-sponsored class in Latin American dance. Hastily disengaging myself from my partner, I left behind the dancers and their tropical boombox, exiting out the far side of the room.

The next room was semi-darkened and filled with contorted bodies and clouds of incense, but at least it was quiet. My initial impression was of some sort of sculptural tableau depicting the death poses of a group of tetanus victims. But as a woman at the head of the group gracefully uncoiled herself and the others followed suit, I realized I had intruded on some sort of arcane exercise class. I sidled past the slowly writhing bodies and continued on toward the elevators.

So far I hadn't seen a single book or magazine on the bare shelves of the first two rooms. Apparently, the library's collection of texts had been relocated elsewhere in order to free up the space for these other anomalous activities, and to insure that any book-lovers wouldn't intrude. The sad gaping spaces where the books had been seemed to me like empty eyesockets on a skull.

My nose alerted me in advance to what awaited me farther on, so I

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wasn't surprised to encounter a cooking class. After succumbing to the class's entreaties to sample some of their output — a very nice margarita and several fish tacos — I continued on in my quest to find Micah Hobblewight.

In short order I passed through a screening of a classic Marx Brothers film; a children's face-painting session; a martial-arts demonstration; a poetry slam involving vinyl records being abused on twin turntables; and some amateur comedians amusing an audience in a setting that resembled a small nightclub, complete with waiters and open bar. I was heckled by the young man holding the microphone as I tried inconspicuously to cross the room.

"Hey, grandpa, what's that *book* you're carrying? Hope it's *How to Get a Life!*"

I picked up my pace under the jeers of the crowd and soon, thank goodness, stood at the elevator bank.

The damp, shadowy sub-sub-sub-basement was lit by intermittent forty-watt bulbs. But I couldn't have felt more at home, for here were all the library's books. Jammed higgledy-piggledy into cartons and tumbling from raw industrial shelving in flagrant disobedience to the Dewey Decimal system, they nonetheless exuded their familiar allure, a mixture of physical attractiveness and numinous potential.

I moved on down the long dank corridor, looking for my designated room.

After what seemed like miles, I found it. A computer-printed banner with my name and the details of my speaking date on it hung above the door.

Inside the nitre'd crypt, about a dozen chairs faced an old-fashioned wooden library table. On the table a selection of my previous books had been nicely arranged, next to a tumbler and pitcher of water. The chairs were occupied by a motley collection of — well, readers is what they plainly were, gathered like a congregation of persecuted Christians in the Roman catacombs. Old and young, shy and bold, they all perked up when I entered.

One elderly man in tweeds, a pilly cardigan, and stained bow tie got up and came to meet me. His white mustache lifted with his friendly smile.

"Welcome, welcome, I'm Micah Hobblewight. We're so pleased you could make it. Not many authors persist through the gauntlet up above. We've begun to despair of ever hearing a live reading again."

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"Well, I almost didn't make it myself. If it weren't for the sustenance of those fish tacos — But anyway, I'm here now. Shall we start?"

"Certainly."

I rested one hip on the corner of the table next to my books, put on my reading glasses, opened the copy of my new novel, found my place, and began to read.

Partway through my reading, one teenaged boy leaned over to his female peer and whispered something.

There issued then from Micah Hobblewight the most resounding and effective "Shush!" ever recorded in the history of libraries since ancient Alexandria.

It was the sweetest sound I had ever heard.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

STRIKE UP THE BAND! Next month we salute the U. S. of A. with a special All-American issue!

Leading the fireworks will be R. Garcia y Robertson, who sets off a wild yarn about Civil War submarines in "Stuck Inside of Mobile." You won't have the blues after reading this romp.

James Stoddard also gives us a rousing war story in "The Battle of York," although his tongue might just possibly be in his cheek as he reinterprets American history. As surely as George cannot tell a lie, we tell you that you'll get a kick out of this one.

Tall tales have long been a way of celebrating American history and lore, and Esther Friesner knows it well. In "Johnny Beansprout," she puts her own distinctive spin on one of America's beloved myths.

We also expect to have an epic from John Morressy next month, along with contributions by Paul Di Filippo, George Guthridge, and Daryl Gregory. Whether you think the United States are still a loose group of unruly colonies or the world's leading nation (or anywhere in between), you're sure to find this issue interesting.

P.S. The rockets' red glare provides adequate light to read by.

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Arthur Porges has contributed many of the most effective short-short stories this magazine has published, going back to 1951 for "The Rats" and including "$1.98," "The Ruum," and "The Liberator." Last year saw publication of his first story collection, The Mirror and Other Strange Reflections. *Now we bring you the first of several new short-shorts he has cooked up, a diabolical little story with an edge to it.*

By the Light of Day

By Arthur Porges

Prologue

TELEMOR, THE ONLY INHABITED planet among the eleven of greatly varied masses that orbit with wild eccentricity the giant blue-white star Vendelet, enjoys, or suffers, seventy hours daily of hot sunshine. Its scientific community has only recently discovered the wonders of calculus, and are totally baffled by even a two-body problem, and so unable to attempt the incredibly complicated interactions of all eleven planets.

Although his hatchet face was impassive, as always the safest expression in the Throne Room, Tyke Timborru, Tormenter-in-Chief to Slavoor the Cruel, was deeply apprehensive. To say that the Emperor was a harsh master would be a vast understatement. He was short-tempered, capricious, unpredictable, and had no more kindness or even toleration in him than a famished weasel-lizard. He had never been seen to smile, and laughed only at the pain or terrible misfortunes of others. Right now, his

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hooded eyes, normally darker and colder than an ice-cave on the system's farthest planet from its sun, were glowing with malice. Tyke was barely able to repress a shudder of dread.

"In two weeks," Slavoor said, "we'll be celebrating the hundredth cycle of my reign, the longest in my noble dynasty, which goes back over five thousand years. Most fortunately, my army has finally captured no other than the infamous traitor, Sammiko Debb, who has so long dared to challenge my position as head of state. Naturally, I burn to punish him as he deserves, and to that end you must come up with a totally new and terrible torture."

"In two weeks?" Tyke said, close to panic. In his thirty-seven years of service to the Emperor he had invented dozens of highly ingenious torments. Could there possibly be another to be found? He doubted it, but a failure to satisfy Slavoor would surely doom him.

"Two weeks," was the grim reply, "or I swear by our eleven planets you'll be a long time dying, in great agony, yourself. Don't fail me!"

At that moment a beam of light came through a slit between two of the ornate draperies to strike Slavoor in the eyes. He snarled like a wild beast, and lifted one imperious finger, whereupon a terrified flunky hastened to shut off the offending glare. And it was then that Tyke had his inspiration.

Exactly twelve days later, he displayed to the Emperor his remarkable torture-dome. A black hemisphere, eight feet in diameter, it was studded with hundreds of glass lenses, each with a different focal length.

"You see, Lord," Tyke exulted, "with many hours of sunlight daily, there is no way the traitor can avoid being burned. No matter how he squirms, writhes, or curls up, some lens, probably several at once, will focus on his naked body, and he will not be able to reach and cover any of them. He cannot survive even one full day."

The Emperor was obviously pleased, and Tyke, greatly relieved, almost collapsed from joy. After a moment of pregnant silence, Slavoor actually smiled, an evil little twitch of his thin lips, and said, "I can give his followers some false hope, and that will add much to my pleasure. I'll issue a Royal Proclamation that if Debb lives until the next morning, he'll be freed and given a pardon."

"Brilliant, Master!" Tyke exclaimed. "A wonderful turn of the screw."

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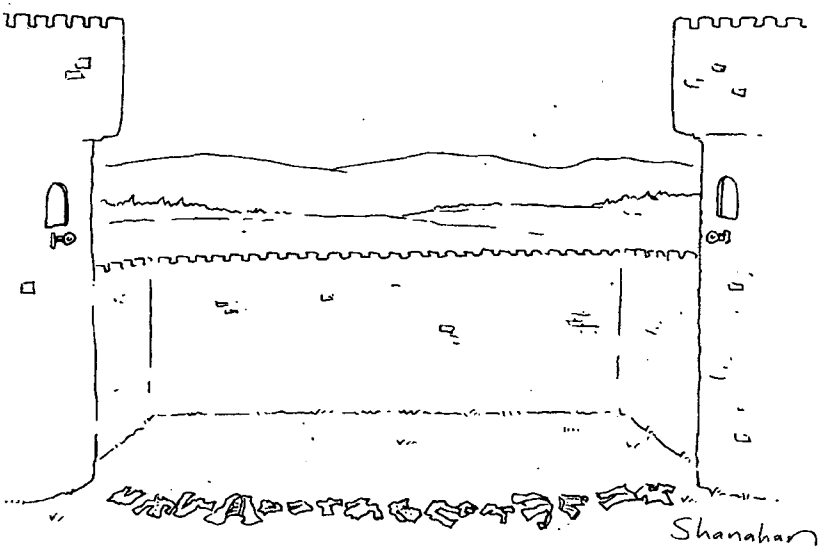
But when the victim was enduring only the third scorching hour of his torment, something happened that the planet had never before experienced: the giant rock world called Dennalar passed in front of the sun, casting its huge shadow on Slavoor's domain. The darkness that ensued was total, caused panic in every community, and soon resulted in general anarchy. Crazed mobs assaulted the palace, massacred the Elite Guard, and proceeded to hack the cowering Emperor into pieces, none bigger than a knucklebone.

When the eclipse ended, something the populace had no reason to expect, they happily chose Sammiko Debb as their absolute monarch, sure of a Brave New World....

Only a few cynics noted that the torture dome was not demolished, and that Tyke Timborru still held the post of Tormenter-in-Chief.



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How does one introduce Glinky? With song? No, don't dare! With doggerel? With fanfare? No no no! Simply say, Here he is!

Glinky

By Ray Vukcevich

1
Not a Bird

GLINKY IS ON TV.

The man with the abdominal gunshot wound isn't watching Glinky.

What the heck is Glinky anyway?

Is he a mouse?

No!

Is she a cat?

No!

It's Glinky, Glinky, Glinky!

The wounded man wants to somehow get to the telephone on the table near the couch and call for help. It's a long way to crawl. Glinky sings him a little song of encouragement, but it's clear the cartoon is mocking him.

When the man gets to the table, he looks back and sees a long smear

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of blood across the carpet and beyond that Glinky glaring at him from the TV.

Who in the world is Glinky?

Some monkey?

No.

A flying fish with horse lips and dog ears?

No, he's just Glinky!

The man stretches up an arm and bats around on the top of the table for the phone. It isn't there. No, wait, there it is. He pulls it off the table and tries to catch it as it falls, and fails, and it hits him in the face, but the pain is nothing like the pain in his gut. The pain from the phone hitting him in the face is trivial. It might as well not be pain at all. He drags the phone into his lap and picks up the receiver and puts it to his ear.

There is no dial tone.

He pulls at the phone wire that leads to the wall. Soon, he's holding the end. The shooter or someone (maybe Glinky?) has unplugged the phone.

He crawls under the table to look for the outlet. He finally spots it behind the couch. Should he try to get back there and plug the phone back in? No. He won't be able to move the couch. He will have to crawl to the front door and yell into the street for help. The door is so far away it looks like he will have to Alice down to a very small size to fit through it. But he must get there first. A journey of a thousand scootches begins with the first scootch.

Will he make it, Glinky?

"No!"

So, he'll never get out of here?

"Not unless he buys something."

What must he buy, Glinky?

"The farm!"

2
To Your Left

Oddly, I'd been on my way to the Medical Mall that day anyway. It was company policy that all my employees undergo annual medical

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checkups, and the fact that I was my only employee did not tempt me to relax the requirement. Karl Sowa Investigations had procedures, and we followed them. I didn't expect to be a one-man operation forever.

I could have driven the few blocks from my office on Eleventh Avenue to the Medical Mall, but instead I made the healthy choice and walked. It was a glorious Oregon day. The sun was shining for a change. The birds were chirping. The squirrels were gathering nuts or whatever urban squirrels gathered. The traffic was a steady hum with not so many horn honks.

Spring at last.

I was thinking I should maybe whistle a happy tune when right behind me, someone shouted, "To your left!"

Meaning, I thought, I should jump to my left.

Wrong.

The bicyclist behind me yelped and swerved to the right at the last moment and clipped me, and I stumbled off the sidewalk where a great wall of metal rushed by, and for a moment I thought I'd stepped onto railroad tracks that had not been there a moment before, but then the thing passed, and I could see it was a city bus. There was some kind of big rodent with huge red eyes painted on the back of the bus. It studied me with smug amusement.

I looked back to see the bicyclist peddling full speed toward a place where the sidewalk made a sharp turn at a building. Probably a kid, I thought, judging by the fact that there were things sticking out of her helmet like horns or ears and long red hair shooting out in all directions — some kind of costume?

Surely she would slow down for the turn. I had a sudden feeling of total satisfaction at the thought of her hitting the building with a cartoon splat, but then I felt guilty for thinking that and then felt okay, realizing it wasn't like it was actually going to happen, but then it did.

The wheels were a blur and for a moment I thought they were not wheels at all but the galloping feet and legs of some kind of furry beast, but before I could get that thought fully formed, the rider ran headlong into the building. Instead of crashing or bouncing back out into traffic, she passed right through the wall as if it were made of smoke.

Before I had time even to doubt what I'd seen, someone shouted, "Don't move!"

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Then there were hands all over me. A young woman told me everything would be okay, you'll be fine, just relax, you're hurt, but we're here to help. There were three of them — two big blond guys with very short hair and the young woman with the soothing voice, all of them wearing white medical coats. One of the guys grabbed me under the arms from behind and the other snatched up my feet, and they lowered me onto a gurney.

"Hey!" I yelled and tried to get off. The woman put both hands on my chest and pushed down. She was pretty strong, but she didn't have to hold me long, because one of the guys pulled a leather strap over my arms and chest and fastened it. Likewise another strap across my lower legs.

"Okay, let's go," the woman said.

One of the guys pushed me onto the sidewalk. The woman walked along beside me patting my shoulder and looking concerned. I lifted my head as much as I could and looked down the length of my body and between my feet and saw the other young man take off running while waving his arms and making siren noises. The guy pushing my gurney picked up the pace, and the woman jogged to keep up. Soon we were zooming along dangerously fast.

The guy making the siren noises didn't slow down for the big automatic glass doors of the Medical Mall. The doors opened just in time, and we zipped into the mall.

The waiting areas were set up like sidewalk cafés so consumers of medical services could watch other consumers strolling up and down the mall. There were small white metal tables and chairs and roving venders offering cola or cappuccino. The doctors were arranged by body parts or maybe alphabetically (podiatry followed by proctology) or maybe metaphorically — is that a kick in the ass or what? Bings and pings now and then interrupted the Muzak which was a song about buying this or buying that, come on, do it for the Glinkster, don't be a tightwad.

We were still moving pretty fast as we passed through one of the café waiting rooms and banged through a set of double doors into a huge bright room. The guy pushing the gurney let it go, and I flew forward spinning like the jack of diamonds tossed at a big silk top hat.

I tightened up for the forthcoming crash and pain, but someone caught my gurney before it hit a wall.

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A new team descended on me. My eyelid was peeled back and a bright light shined into my eye, first on the left and then on the right. Someone else stuck a needle in my arm behind the elbow.

"Hey, I'm not hurt," I yelled. "Let me up."

"Relax, Karl," a woman said. "Everything is going to be fine."

How did she know my name?

I felt the familiar coldness of a stethoscope on my chest and looked down to see that I was now wearing only my underwear and that my arms and legs were no longer strapped down.

The guy listening to my chest put away his stethoscope and said, "Get up now, please."

I got up. There were two women and one man dressed in white like the ones who'd snatched me off the street. I looked around the big room and it did not seem so big now and the gurney I'd ridden in on was now an examination table and instead of three people, there was only the one nurse, neat, maybe mid-forties, very efficient, no nonsense, and she directed me to a scale and weighed and measured me.

"Boy oh boy," she said.

"What?"

"Nothing, just your weight and height."

"Is it unusual?"

"We're all individuals, aren't we? Jump back up on here." I sat on the edge of the examination table, and she checked my reflexes.

"Whoa!" she said when my knee jerked.

"What?"

She turned my head to one side and put something in my ear and said, "Well, this is interesting." She turned my head the other way to look into my other ear. "Here, too," she said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Everything is shipshape."

"But what about my ears?"

"What about your ears?"

"Never mind."

"Well, just relax," she said. "The doctor will be with you shortly."

Which meant sometime in the indefinite future but probably before I died of old age or hell froze over.

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I had lost track of the number of times I'd gone completely through my compressed Tai Chi routine by the time the doctor stepped in. I froze in the middle of Lan Ch'ueh Wei (Grasping the Bird's Tail).

"Well, I see you can still dance," he said. "I'm Dr. Jones." He held out his hand for me to shake. "Sit down, Mr. Sorrow."

"Sowa," I said. "Karl Sowa."

He was maybe fifty with no hair at all on his head or face and that made him look a little rounder than he probably was. Oddly, his nametag said Dr. Smith. He flipped through the pages on his clipboard. "Things look pretty good, Karl. I see you've been eating right and exercising regularly."

"How could you know that?"

"The usual channels," he said. "No jogging?"

"No jogging," I said.

"Yes, well, never mind. I see you don't smoke. Moderate alcohol. Good, good. A little goes a long way, as they say. Ha ha. Your cholesterol count is good. All things considered I'd say you're in excellent health."

"That's good to hear," I said.

"Except for the bus, of course," he said.

"Actually it was the bike," I said. "The bus missed me."

"You may be confused," he said. "But even so, what about next time? No, I won't beat around the bush, Mr. Sorrow. You are in the awkward position of being totally healthy. That is, the odds of you dropping dead from some disease are quite small."

"Why is that awkward?" I asked. "It sounds pretty good to me."

"Awkward for you," he said. "This makes you perfect for us."

"Perfect for you?"

"We have something to help you."

"Help me with what?"

"The bus," he said. "The healthy ones always get hit by a bus."

I waited for him to smile, but he seemed deadly serious. After another moment of eye contact, he said, "There is a new medication from our corporate partner, Philosophical Pharmaceuticals, called Pilula Omnibus. Just out. The latest thing."

"What does that mean?"

"You could call it the 'Bus Pill.'"

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"I don't get it," I said. "What's it for?"

"For people like you," he said. "Guys like you you're all the time exercising. Right? You get a lot of fiber in your diet. Not much red meat. Vitamins. You don't smoke. Maybe a couple of fingers of Old Cow after dinner, am I right?"

"I think that's Old Crow," I said.

"Whatever. So what happens to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"All that clean living means you've just got to get hit by a bus, Karl."

"And you mean this pill...."

"Exactly," he said. "Pilula Omnibus protects you from life's last little irony. Here's a sample." He put a small blue pill in my hand.

"So, does it work on other stuff?" I asked. "Like icy sidewalks?"

"Well, I don't know about that," he said. "Let me get you some water."

He walked over to a water cooler and brought me back a little paper cone of water. "Go ahead. Take it."

So, I did. Hey, he was a doctor, after all.

"Good. Good." He walked to the door. "Now just wait here."

"But what am I waiting for?"

"The next bus," he said and closed the door behind him.

I found my clothes on a chair to one side of the examination table. My socks were in my shoes. My pants were folded neatly on the chair. My shirt was draped around the back. It didn't look like an arrangement I would have created myself, but at this point I could not be sure. I got dressed.

I wondered what the pill would do.

I didn't feel any different.

But then I caught a whiff of tobacco smoke. Incredibly, someone somewhere in the Medical Mall was smoking. The smell got suddenly stronger and louder as a woman stepped out of a nook over by the soda machines, and the space expanded and filled with many people moving in all directions, everyone with a noise to contribute to the heavy echo in the big bus station. I could see lots of cigarette butts crushed out on the floor where the woman had been lurking. She must have been waiting for some time for the doctor to leave so we could be alone in the crowd.

"There's no time to lose," she said. "We've got to get you out of here before they realize what I'm up to." She meant the people watching

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through the big glass windows above the mezzanine — it could have been the whole medical staff up there elbowing one another and pointing and whispering behind their hands.

Now along with the cigarette smoke, there was the heavy odor of old cooking grease and diesel fuel.

The woman was more than thirty and dressed in jeans and a shirt that wasn't long enough to hide her navel. Long frizzy red hair poking out at odd angles, brown eyes, no smile at the moment, but I imagined her smile would be a very nice thing to see. I didn't know her, but I did recognize the bicycle helmet under her arm. It had fuzzy donkey or maybe deer ears attached to it.

"Look out!" she yelled and pushed me back, and a bus roared between us.

When it passed, the woman who had just saved my life was still there. She hurried across to me, and we ran. People got out of our way, but when we tried to merge with the bus station crowd, they wouldn't let us in. Whenever we approached they pushed us back into the path of the buses. I took the woman's hand, and we ran again. I could hear the next bus screaming up behind us.

I thought the bus pill was supposed to protect me from buses. Instead it seemed to be attracting them. I imagined someone up there among the medical people was telling the others it was time to go back to the drawing board. Get another test subject. This one was going to be a goner soon. There seemed to be no safe place for us.

But then an idea hit me. "Wait." I looked around but didn't immediately see what I wanted and felt a moment of despair, and then I spotted it and said, "Over there," and took off, dragging her behind me.

I pulled us to a halt by a small blue sign on a post. The sign read, "Bus stop."

"Get back up on the sidewalk," I said, "and then follow my lead as fast as you can."

I waited until the next bus appeared and then put out my hand to signal the driver. I got up on the sidewalk beside the woman and waited. As the bus roared ever closer, I lost all confidence in my plan. What was there to stop the bus from crashing onto the sidewalk? Nothing. Maybe we should run again. Too late.

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The bus didn't run up on the sidewalk after us. It stopped at the sign and the door hissed open. The woman hurried on, and I followed right after her.

Something was holding me back. Getting on the bus was like forcing my way into a high wind. The bus pill had not made it impossible for a bus to hit me, but it was making it hard for me to get on a bus. There were certainly more than a few bugs in the formula.

"Come on," the woman said. She grabbed my hand and gave me a good yank, and I passed through the invisible barrier and nearly stumbled into the driver.

The woman dropped coins in the coin device, and the driver closed the door. We found seats together about halfway back.

3

"Ask not what your action figure can do.
Ask what you can do with your action figure."

She had to hand it to him. Getting on the bus instead of trying to run from it was a great idea. She went to work on his shirt buttons starting at the top.

"Be still," she said. "And relax."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm putting a big Band-Aid on your tummy where the bus hit you."

"Okay, I guess, that's okay," he said. "But it was the bike."

He slumped in his seat and became perfectly still. He was the very embodiment of the idea that "this seat is taken." Better than a straw hat with fake daisies, but she needed to get him back into his major mode — tough wisecracking detective.

She slipped her hand into the front of his pants.

No dice.

Probably she should have bought the optional Auxiliary Dick Kit (batteries not included).

Maybe he would feel more confident if he were holding his gun.

She checked the placement of the bandage over his wound and buttoned his shirt back up. No shoulder holster. So, maybe he carried heat

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in his belt at the back? She bent him forward and pulled the coat up around his shoulders. Nothing. Don't tell me he's unarmed, she thought. What the heck am I paying for? She pulled his coat down and sat him back up.

She would have to improvise.

She picked up his right hand and straightened the first finger and cocked the thumb creating the classic bang bang you're dead position for cops and robbers.

A light came back into his eyes.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," he said. "Thanks." He poked his hand into his coat and when he pulled it out, the gun she had formed of his fingers was gone.

"Let me tell you what's happening," she said.

4
I Eat a Sandwich

"Where are we going?" I asked the woman with the bike helmet. No, wait. She wasn't carrying the bike helmet now.

"Brooklyn," she said.

"What did you do with your helmet?"

"I dropped the head," she said.

It's always important to have something to say when you're confused. "Did it bounce?" I asked.

It was like we were talking through a layer of maple syrup or maybe like we were communicating with Morse code and it took a few seconds for her to work out what I'd just said. Or maybe we were not sitting right next to each other. Maybe I was still in Oregon and she was already in Brooklyn and it took a while for my voice to make it all the way across the country.

"Here we are," she said.

I had not been to the East Coast in many years, but I had no trouble believing I was looking out the bus window at a Brooklyn neighborhood.

We got off in front of a storefront window with the words "Phil's Kosher Deli" in big white letters. The woman took my arm and walked toward the deli. Up close, she smelled very nice.

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Bells jingled when the door opened. She let go of my arm and walked to a high glass butcher case and spoke to a big guy slicing meat.

She glanced back at me. "I've ordered you a Black Forest ham and Swiss on rye. You want a big dill pickle?"

"What are we doing here?"

"This is my favorite deli in all the world," she said and looked back at the man slicing meat who now had a big grin. "And Phil is my all time favorite deli guy."

"Here you go," Phil said. He put a plate with a huge sandwich on top of the display case. "You want that pickle?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

Phil dipped into a gallon jar and put a pickle on my plate and pushed the plate forward a little as if to say, well, go on, take it. I picked it up and held it, not knowing what to do next. Phil and the woman both looked at me like they were waiting for me to catch on.

Finally, the woman said, "Well, take it to a booth."

She turned back to Phil who got back to the business of building another sandwich. I watched them for a moment, still not moving. Phil stopped slicing meat. The woman looked over her shoulder at me again.

"Well, what about something to drink?" I asked.

Phil laughed a huge laugh, and the woman's smile made me feel like maybe I was getting the old patter back. I'd been right; it was a wonderful smile.

"Give us a couple of cream sodas, Phil," she said.

Not wanting to push my luck, I took my sandwich to a booth.

A few minutes later, she slid in across from me, and a moment after that, Phil delivered the cream sodas in tall brown bottles along with a couple of glasses of crushed ice.

"Yummy," she said and picked up her sandwich and took a huge bite and chewed and gazed off into space with a look of absolute contentment on her face.

I took a bite of mine, too. It was very good. In fact, it was probably the best ham and Swiss I'd ever eaten. The cheese was so fresh it was crumbly. And the ham...well, you couldn't get ham like that in Oregon.

"I'm Karl Sowa," I said.

"Over there," she said.

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"You're suppose to tell me who you are when I tell you who I am," I said. "And maybe what's going on?"

She put her sandwich down and reached under the table like she was searching her pockets or maybe digging in a purse. She produced a business card and handed it across to me.

URBANA FONTANA — SCENE SHIFTER

Black block letters on white. No address. No phone.

"Is that really your name?" I asked.

"Over here," she said.

"What is this over here and over there business? Why not just tell me what's going on?"

"Over there, you're Karl Sowa," she said. "Over here, you're Chuck Sorrow. Over there, you're legal to do private investigation work. Over here, well, let's just say you get things done for people who don't ask too many questions. Over there my name is Jane Boyd. Over here, I'm Urbana Fontana and I can change little things. Get it?"

"Not even a little," I said.

"Let me put it this way," she said. "Earlier today an incursion into history occurred. Something from Elsewhere muscled into our reality. Since it was never supposed to be here, there was no place for it. It made room for itself by pushing other things aside. And since those things couldn't just go away, they were all crushed together and thereby got a little strange."

"I see," I said, but my sarcasm was wasted on her.

"The Squeeze," she said, "has caused a Disturbance which is washing backward and forward in time changing things. One of the things that is clear over here is that there was a plague of sympathetic magic involving the name game back in the eighties. Do you know the name game?"

"Robin robin bo bobbin...."

"Don't!"

"Why not?"

"Are you crazy?" she said. "Do you want to cause absolute chaos? Don't you remember the riots in the streets?"

"Actually, I don't," I said.

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"How strange," she said. "Maybe it hasn't gotten to you yet. When it does, you'll remember it. Anyway, over here, my mother thought I would have an easier time in life if it were hard to work me into the name game. Her first thought was Terpsichore, but then she realized people would call me Terp, and that would be too easy, so she named me Urbana. Totally ineffective, by the way, since some people think it's harder and some think it's easier."

I couldn't help myself. Silently, I sang, "Urbana Urbana bo burbana."

There was a deep thud, and the lights flickered.

"Stop it," she said. "I can see what you're doing."

"It's clear," I said, "I'm having a bad reaction to the Bus Pill. I'm probably collapsed in the mall back in Oregon."

"Don't you think it's a little strange there even is a Bus Pill in the first place?"

"Well, there is that," I said.

She picked up her sandwich and took another bite, which reminded me that a bad reaction to some medication back in Oregon wouldn't explain this excellent ham and Swiss on rye. The texture of the dark rye bread. The crisp dark green lettuce of a variety I couldn't name. The sweet smell of red onions and mustard. The sandwich was simply too much in and of the world as I now knew it to be an hallucination.

Not to mention the cream soda.

"So, what is this something from elsewhere?"

"Glinky," she said.

I knew that name but I could not remember why. It had something to do with my current case. Of that much I was certain, but every time I reached for it, it scuttled away to the shadows where it watched me with red eyes. Red eyes also reminded me of something but I couldn't pin that down either.

"Everyone knows there are an infinite number of universes," she said, "many of them just a step this way or that way from this world."

"I think I saw something about that a couple of years ago during the very last season of PBS," I said. And speaking of PBS, the very idea of "Public" things was pretty strange these days. Public education? A dead dinosaur. Social security? Don't make me laugh. Public lands? Get out of here. Public airwaves? Oh, shut up.

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"Glinky has jumped from one of those universes and has inserted itself into ours. Your mission, as you very well know, is to drive it out of here and save the world."

"Somehow that doesn't sound like a mission I would gladly undertake," I said. "In fact, all of this smells fishy to me. How do I know you're playing straight with me?"

"Think about cilantro," she said. "Do you remember that having anything to do with Mexican food when you were growing up?"

"Well, no."

"Now it's as if it's always been a big part of the cuisine," she said. "And don't even talk about broccoli."

"What about broccoli?"

"No one knew about broccoli when I was growing up. It's like it hadn't been invented. But now everyone knows it's been around forever."

"But I remember broccoli always being around."

"That's what I'm saying," she said. "Things are uneven. Soon, you'll remember growing up with all kinds of things."

"You mean until this morning there was no broccoli? That's a little hard to believe."

"So, consider Portobello mushrooms," she said.

I considered Portobello mushrooms.

"And what about the way cold fusion suddenly started working?" she asked.

"Science is like that." I could hear the doubt in my own voice. "Right out of the blue something pops up."

"No," she said. "None of that happened until this morning when Glinky showed up and his arrival reverberated through time changing things. The real danger is that everything we know will be pushed aside, crowded out. There is only so much room in reality. When Glinky got here, it pushed us all out toward the edges. As it elbows more and more room for itself, we will get more and more squeezed. Things will be pretty terrible when we're all just smears on the inside of the jar that is reality."

"So, how do you know so much about Glinky?" I asked.

"He wasn't always such a rat," she said.

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"They never are."

"Back when we were in college," she said, "he told me no matter how good the Business got, it would still be just the two of us."

"But now you think there's someone else?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think so?"

"Little things," she said.

There were always little things.

"Well, now you know everything, and you can go do your job," she said. "Finish your soda."

Why not? I sighed and picked up the glass. "Drink me," I said, and tossed the rest of it down in a couple of big gulps.

"Okay, now put your arms up like this." She held up her arms like she was reading a very big invisible book. "And close your eyes."

I held my arms up and closed my eyes. "Now what?"

I heard her slide out of the booth, and my fingers closed around what I recognized at once as a steering wheel, and my heart lurched. I opened my eyes and swerved back into the right lane. The car rocked as a bus screamed by honking in the other direction. I got the car and my breathing under control and looked around. Yes, this was my old Mercedes, and yes, I was back in Eugene, Oregon. A moment later I passed a street sign and confirmed that I was driving in the South Hills of the city on my way to find out if Daniel Boyd was really cheating on his wife.

5
Danny Boyd

You might suddenly realize you are here right now — totally present. It's like you wake up and think, oh, yeah, here I am, and this is all there is and all there ever was or will be. The things you remember are all part of this moment — just stuff you might be thinking about now. If you consider history, all you're doing is considering history. It's not like you can ever be right about it. The steps, causes, reasons for your current situation are simply a story you tell yourself so you won't freak at the thought that you've just popped into existence and that there is no reason to think you won't pop out again as soon as you lose that feeling

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of here-and-nowness. At least you were blissfully ignorant before there were Glinky waves to wash you off your feet.

I pull up in my aging Mercedes in front of the South Hills love nest of Daniel Boyd, the dynamic CEO of Philosophical Pharmaceuticals, who has inserted himself into our community and has become an overnight big shot. My plan is to ring the bell, and when his squeeze answers the door, snap her photo.

The idea of "plan" is very strange in this context. Do I even have a camera? Does thinking about the future have any value when you only exist now? And if I have already pulled up at the front of the house, why am I still moving?

I park up the hill and walk down to the house where Daniel Boyd keeps his mistress. Boyd has been buying and selling stuff, backing this project and opposing that one, building megastores and pushing aside the little guys, changing the landscape with broad, brutal sweeps of money, getting his smiling face in the papers and on TV. He runs a local infomercial called *Why*? WHY is the NYSE symbol for Philosophical Pharmaceuticals. The show is mostly about why you should take Danny's pills.

I ring the bell. The woman who answers the door looks just like Jane Boyd, Danny's wife who hired me to find out what he's up to. I am momentarily thrown totally off my game.

"Jane?"

She blows smoke my way and says, "Jane Jane bo bane...."

"Please, don't do that, Sweetheart." A man behind her puts his hands on her shoulders and pulls her back into the gloom. Danny Boyd takes her place in the doorway. He is so tall, dark, and handsome, he should be modeling men's suits for guys already at the top instead of selling pills. He says, "Mr. Sorrow, I presume?"

He may not always have been a rat, but he's a rat now, and he's got a gun. He motions me inside.

The woman who answered the door is pouring herself a drink. The bungalow opens right into a living room from the fifties — a flowered couch and end tables, a rotary dial telephone, bar and bar stools, a couple of chairs, and a big TV with rabbit ears. The TV is on and muttering softly to itself.

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I see now that the woman might not be Jane after all. Why would Boyd be fooling around with a woman who looks so much like his wife? Maybe he isn't really fooling around. Maybe he has a woman who looks like Jane in every one of his houses around the world — duplicates so he doesn't have so much to pack when he travels.

"Move over by the bar," Danny says.

"What's this all about?"

"Give him the envelope," he says, and the woman hands me a big brown envelope.

She walks over to Danny who keeps the gun pointed my way. He takes the drink from her. "Go wait in the car."

She sighs like she should have seen that coming and leaves. As soon as the front door closes behind her, Danny says, "Open it."

I pull a big eight-by-ten glossy out of the envelope.

Me and Urbana on the bus. My shirt is open all the way down. She's got her hand tucked into the front of my pants. Where in the world was the photographer standing?

"Now you know," Danny says.

"No, I don't," I say.

He shoots me and goes on out to join his wife in the car.

So, now how am I supposed to save the world, Glinky?

"You can't!"

I could call a friend, but the phone will just hit me in the face and then not work anyway. I can keep scootching for the front door, but I know I'll never make it.

What would happen if I turned Glinky off? I hang a sharp belly right and squirm for the TV.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?"

I struggle up to sit right in front of the flickering rodent. The flaw in my plan is now evident. No buttons on the TV and no remote.

Glinky sticks out his forked tongue at me and then turns and shows me his backside, waggles his naked tail at me, makes blubbery raspberry sounds with his horse lips.

I put my palms flat against the warm glass of the screen. It's just me and the Rat from Elsewhere now. I make my last desperate move. If there are to be riots in the streets again, so be it.

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I chant, "Glinky Glinky bo binky."

He screams.

"Banana fanna fo finky."

Now there are a couple of big dials and knobs on the TV.

"Me my mo minky."

Don't touch that dial!

"Glinky!"

I turn him off.

Just like that.

I hear someone making siren sounds in the distance. I hope it's the guys with the gurney.

F&SF COMPETITION #68

THE MISSING TWIST: Many of the stories we know best originally had a twist ending, but careless printers lost the last page of the manuscripts. For example:

"No problem," said Sauron. "I'll just use my *other* ring."

Supply the dropped manuscript page (no more than 100 words).

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or email entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by July 15, 2004. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

Prizes: First prize will receive a signed hardcover copy of *Mortal Love* by Elizabeth Hand. Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of competition #68 will appear in the December 2004 issue.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

KING ME

FIRST, THE obvious: *The Return of the King* is a suitably grand, albeit flawed finale to what is barnone, hands-down, and by-a-country-mile the finest high fantasy movie series ever made. One question that arises from this verity is: Does that make it a great film, or merely the winner of a beauty contest for goats?

On first glance, the imperfections of the film appear as monumental as its length. The endless pontifications, for one. Was the sound byte an invention of Middle Earth? So it would appear, for every time a big moment looms, nothing will do but that someone steps forward to announce its advent with a pithy, faux-Shakespearean and patently unnecessary pronouncement. When, for example, Legolas is given to intone, "There is a sleepless malice in the West," the only appropriate response I could think of, considering the circumstance (not long before the final battle), was, "Duh!" With the exception of Viggo Mortensen, who underplays his role to good advantage, the actors are not so much acting as posing in costume — at times it feels almost as if we've been invited to a medieval vogue party. The so-last-century British perception of and fixation upon class, most obviously evidenced by the bond between Frodo and Sam, is framed in an especially hideous manner when Frodo the hobbit aristocrat tells his doting gentleman's gentleman that he could not possibly carry the Ring of Power, that it would destroy him, a patent insult to which Sam, obeying the doughty regulations of his kind, responds by saying that he may not be able to carry the Ring, but he can by God carry the young

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master, whereupon he picks up the enervated Frodo and goes serfing up the slopes of Mount Doom. This relationship came to seem so cloyingly godawful, I half-expected a scene in which Sam, on his knees, tongue lolling, receives a snausage from Frodo's hand. While these and other imperfections are faithful to the source material, Jackson has always claimed that he needed to make the material work as a movie, and it strikes me that some minor adjustments in tone might have enhanced the process.

A number of Jackson's own authorial choices are no less dismaying. The editing (a strength of the first two films) is inconsistent, as is the CGI, and cutting Saruman from the final third of the trilogy was not a terrific idea — without Christopher Lee to put a human face on evil, we are left with the Sauron's-flaming-eye dealie, which comes to acquire all the menace of one of those decorative electronic *objets d'excess income* that can be ordered from yuppie catalogs. (I would hazard a guess that you might already be able to order a palantir with flaming eye effect from one company or another.) Surely some of the lugubrious farewells at the end of the movie could have been trimmed or left out altogether in order to remedy this omission. The white light scene-fades upon which Jackson relies in *Return* imbue the film with a New Age taint that serves to leech the impact of its natural pagan coloration, and Howard Shore's score hits new depths of drear sappiness, especially with those incessant Celtic keenings. Will the person who's been torturing Enya or Loreena McKennitt or Renee Fleming... Could they just stop? Some of us need a break, okay? Give the lady a Xanax.

Against all the above we can set the spectacular portions of the movie: the sequence that displays the lighting of the beacons that summon the Riders of Rohan to the aid of Gondor; the stair of Minas Morghul; Shelob's tunnel; and, of course, the battles, in particular the siege of Minas Tirith. Those are the scenes that remain in memory — the majority of the rest fades from mind or has the feel of sideshow material, like the ineptly scripted handling of Denethor, the steward of Gondor, and his parenting difficulties, which seems to have been inserted into the overarching story for no other purpose than to lay on a little Greek tragedy. All this makes me wonder exactly how we should view both *Return* and the entire

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trilogy. Obviously, a final judgment won't be possible until the extended version of *Return* is released and one can watch the three films in close sequence; but since LOTR is basically a story of war, it might be interesting to contrast the Ring trilogy with another ten-plus hour film trilogy that treats of the same subject — I'm speaking of Masaki Kobayashi's *The Human Condition*.

Kobayahshi was a pacifist who was forced into the army and served in Manchuria prior to WW II; he refused all promotion and was beaten frequently for resisting orders. His trilogy, one of the unquestioned masterpieces of world cinema, engages war's despair and the debasing effect it visits upon everyone whom it touches. On the other hand, Tolkien (I prefer to use him instead of Jackson as the comparative since he was the true author of the piece), served briefly in France during WWI, was wounded by shrapnel, and — invalided — spent the next couple of years standing guard on Britain's sea wall, a tour of duty during which he wrote the first tales of his mythic chronicle. While LOTR cannot be described as pro-war, it supports the moral rightness of war under certain circumstances, celebrates heroism, exalts the psychic attrition of combat by dealing with it in terms of fell wounds and the like, and confronts death in terms of meeting it nobly or with ignominy. That Tolkien chose to translate his war agony into epic fantasy, whereas Kobayashi strove for a brutal naturalism and limited his canvas to war's destruction of a single soldier, speaks to the cultural differences between the two men and likely to personal differences as well. I suspect Tolkien's Christian faith and the fact that he lost friends in the war, yet did not witness their deaths, made it possible for him to view death as the start of a long journey (as Gandalf describes it in his speech on the ramparts).

A more apt comparison can be made between LOTR and Richard Wagner's tetralogy of operas, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (the Ring cycle). Both are cultural landmarks, if not towering works of art, giving voice to the social temper of the times in which they were produced. The similarities between Wagner's libretto and Tokien's text are profound. In both, a Ring of Power — one that curses its bearer — is at issue; an immortal surrenders her immortality for love; friend kills friend (brother kills brother) to possess the Ring; a broken weapon is reforged; the Ring is returned to its

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origin; the gods (elves) renounce the world and mankind is left to seek its own destiny; etc., etc., etc. It might be said that Tolkien reforged Wagner's story and used it for a different purpose. But while these similarities are of moment to those who care to debate the German composer's influence (or lack thereof) upon the Oxford philologist, the question posed is, How should we view Peter Jackson's trilogy?, and there is a similarity yet unmentioned between the two Rings that bears more closely upon this. They each revolve about spectacular set pieces, and the intervals separating those set pieces are filled with padding — silly side plots, incidences of heroic suspense, and literal breaks in narrative that allow for breaths to be taken. Pure connective tissue, much of which seems disposable. A clunky structure that is not atypical of opera. And that, I believe, is how we should judge Peter Jackson's trilogy: as an opera whose arias are battles. (Amazing, if you think about it, that no one has scored an opera using Tolkien as a source.) That's how it works on screen. If it is to be so judged, then criticisms about the pacing, direction, acting, editing, and so forth, while not entirely irrelevant, are definitely not central to the matter at hand. When we attend an opera, we don't care if the fat lady can act, just so long as she hits the high notes. *The Return of the King* hits all the high notes and sustains them beautifully. Instead of presenting us with the terrible nature of war as did Kobayashi, Tolkien and Jackson have given us war's music, and although those who have experience of war may feel that this music is the translation of bitter actuality into something too glorious, too glamorous, to reflect the agonies of battle, thus creating a kind of moral subterfuge, it is nonetheless stirring.

Late in *The Return of the King*, after Frodo and his mates have returned to the Shire, there is a small moment that makes me hearken back to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which stands as the purest cinematic event of the three films, mainly because it contained more effective small moments than did the sequels — moments that permitted character to be defined and gave the project a human scope and poignancy that became lost in all the posturing and spectacle. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin are sitting at a table in a tavern, silent in the midst of a happy hobbit tumult. Their silence speaks volumes. In it, we feel their separation from the

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crowd bustling around them, the weight of what they have been through, the strange, magnificent, and horrific sights that they have witnessed. It's a powerfully authentic moment, true to the experience of every soldier who returns from war in a foreign land to discover that he has been alienated from a place that once felt like home, and it's accomplished without a single pompous sound byte. After all the padding, the ill-considered attempts at groundling humor (such as the off-tone dwarf jokes), the inessential suspense bits (Aragorn's brush with the wolves in *The Two Towers*, for example), the less satisfying small moments distorted by pontification, this brief scene shines out. The end of the movie, the tears and smiles and hugs backed by the incessant lament of Enya-or-whoever: these are operatic gestures, sadness as eroticism, emotions so broadly rendered as to be visible to those in the cheap seats, and though they may elicit tears, it's a cheap trick — the tears elicited are Pavlovian, a response to proven stimuli. Those scenes lack all genuineness. They are formal structures, opportunities to reprise the theme music, arias of farewell. They move us, but fail to impose other than a maudlin truth.

I wish Jackson had seen fit to incorporate more small moments like that tavern scene into the last two films, to braid them into the fantasy as he did in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It would, I believe, have made the trilogy weightier, a film we could reasonably compare with classic war movies such as *The Human Condition*. It would have lent an extra dimension to Tolkien's themes and yet would not have weakened the film's entertainment value. I suppose many will see this as quibbling, and to a degree they are correct, because what Jackson has presented us is worth celebrating simply in terms of his illumination of Tolkien's visuals. That he neglected certain aspects of the story can mainly be chalked up to time constraints and the logistics of making a 360-million-dollar film, and he deserves every reward he receives for his creation. When the Black Tower crumbles and the very land of Mordor collapses and Mount Doom erupts, we are left wishing there was another episode to follow — a sign we have been well-entertained. The trilogy has now gone into the popular culture, standing as an incomparable feat of technical magic, and criticism of the project will seem no more than dust raised by its vast passage. Still and

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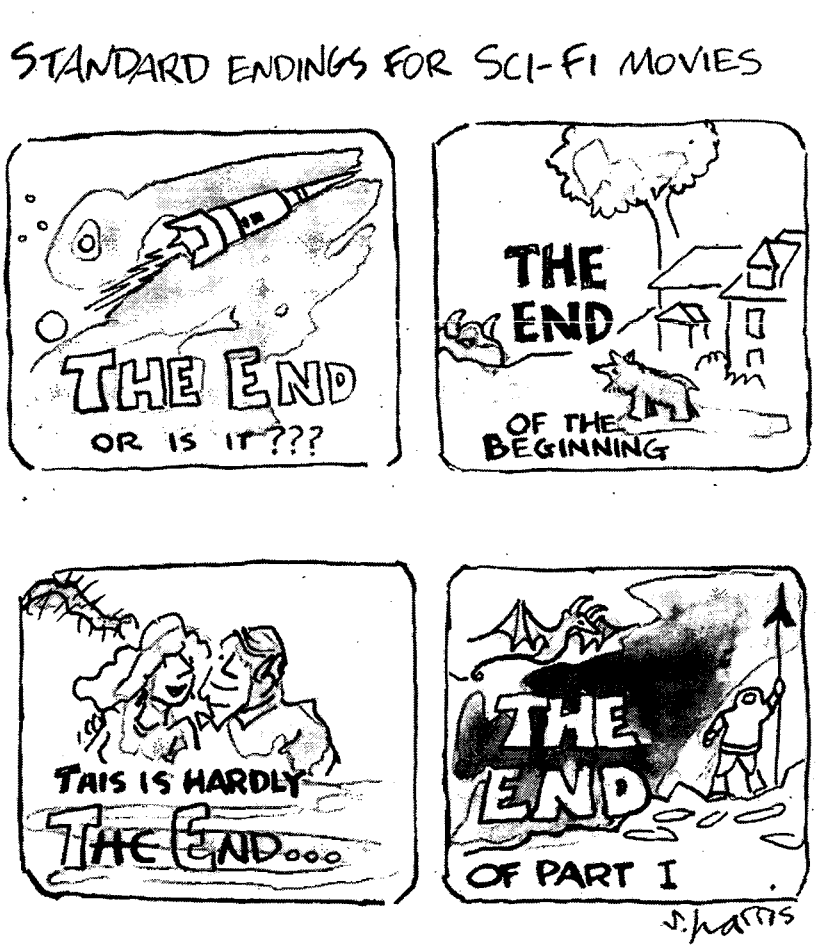
all, a quibble or two is not completely out of order, and I submit, for whatever value it may supply, that LOTR's hallucinatory content — giant spider, F-16 pterodactyls, super-mega-mastodons, et al. — might have been better served with a lighter touch of magic, a few fewer epic sorrows, and a smattering of sufferings more mundane. ☙



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As we assembled the forthcoming collection of fantasy stories from F&SF, In Lands that Never Were, *the question arose: is there any difference between heroic fantasy and high fantasy? Or between heroic fantasy and swords & sorcery? We found no answers, but the main link connecting all such stories seems to be that they're all magical adventures in unreal lands.*

Charlie Finlay's new story certainly fits that bill. It's the second adventure for Vertir and Kuikin (after "For Want of a Nail" in our March 2003 issue) and it's liable to stay with you forever.

After the Gaud Chrysalis

By Charles Coleman Finlay

THE NUN IN THE LIZARD-scale robes stood taller than either of the men, not a remarkable thing in itself since they were both of average height or a bit shorter; but she was also wider than the stocky one and swaggered with a more martial bearing than the professional soldier.

The nub of her chin jutted out as she shook her round head. "I can't do it, Kuikin. I've taken the seven sacred vows."

Kuikin, the stocky man in drab clothes, folded his hands in front of him in an aspect of prayer. He opened them like two halves of a shell, as if to indicate the smallness of her vow. Or perhaps that it should be treasured like a pearl. Deliberately ambiguous. The last time he'd seen her was years ago, just before she'd taken her vows, and there had been things left unspoken and unsettled even then.

"I know," he said. "But please. Elizeh."

At the mention of her name, she raised her fist to his bent, oft-broken nose. "No."

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A grin smeared across his face. "What about your vow to follow the path of righteous peace, Sister?"

"We all stray from the path sometimes," she said, quickly dropping her fist. "Don't parse logic with me. I've packed those days away in storage. I won't do it."

Vertir, the professional soldier, lean and dark-haired, shifted his scabbard and looked into the blossom-heavy trees of the convent garden.

"You wanted to come fetch her," he said. "If she won't come willingly, let's go speak to the Abbess. Or leave her behind."

Kuikin and Elizeh stared at each other, waiting for the other to blink. He opened the ink-stained fingers of one hand and gestured for her to go first.

The Abbess sat at her desk, the lemony walls around her imprinted with the shapes of living leaves in countless hues of green.

Vertir produced the seal, which was not that of the Dynast, but of the Notary-General of Implements and Roads; nor yet his seal of office, but his private mark.

Her ancient skin as smooth and unblemished as a child's, the diminutive Abbess looked at the seal and genuflected quickly toward the Dynast's distant palace.

"Mother Abbess," said Elizeh. "Let me tell you what they — "

The old woman tapped the leafy plaster with her fingertip, then touched her ear.

Kuikin exchanged a glance with Vertir. Even the convent walls had ears. But then, what walls did not?

Covering her head with a scaly cowl, the Abbess took up her walking staff and left the room. She thumped out a hasty cadence as she skirted the switchback trail that led to the terraced vineyards on the mountainside and chose instead the paved way downward into the Vale of Lesser Gods.

They passed graceful patios of pitted limestone where the dragon godlings crawled about, flicking their forked tongues at the air and flaring the fan-shaped ruffs about their necks. Cloaked novices slowly moved about, whisking the patios clean; one of them swept in the direction of the small party.

The Abbess paused, shook her head, then hurried on to an elegant

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bridge that spanned a stony gorge. The air there held the crisp, empty fragrance of early spring. Her cane thunked out to the middle of the bridge and stopped.

Kuikin glanced around. The fortress gate was barely visible through the trees at the bottom of the road. A host of purple birds congregated noisily in the treetops closer by, but the grasses below were empty except for a few logs and boulders.

No walls, no ears.

"Why," asked the Abbess, "does the Dynast's spymaster and arranger of assassinations send his lackeys after Sister Renn?"

Elizeh had become Renn when she joined the convent, Kuikin reminded himself. "We wish to borrow her experience."

"It's impossible," Elizeh said. "I can't — "

The Abbess's cane thumped on the bridge. "I will decide what is and is not possible for you." Then to Kuikin, "You have one chance to sway me. Explain this unusual request."

He opened his mouth to state — diplomatically — that the Dynast did not need to explain his demands. But Vertir said, "A gaud chrysalis is found in the Valley of Divinrifft."

The Abbess scoffed. "Gaud is dead. That age has passed."

"There are sorcerers who live to see it return," Kuikin said.

She curled her lip and drew a sharp breath. "So this is a rumor, mere wishful thinking on their part."

"Even if it is — " Kuikin hedged, unwilling to give specifics.

But Vertir said, "The Bey of Desmeé has sent soldiers and his arch-sorcerer to collect it, to bring it in state to the Temple of Gaud in his beyant."

The Abbess scowled. "He cannot. The Bey's oath of fealty requires him to render service to the Dynast. Whatever his faith."

"Just," Kuikin said, "as the convent's charter and grant requires you to render service to the Dynast when he requests it."

"But the Dynast's own code of laws promises everyone a choice of worship and interference with no deity."

"Just as the path of your faith holds abhorrent the doctrine of Transfiguration and the marriage to the life of the flesh."

Her scowl deepened. "But why do you need her to go after that...that *thing*?"

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"We don't," Vertir said.

"Elizeh — " Kuikin began, and saw her tense at the mention of her name, but the Abbess cut him off.

"Sister Renn."

Kuikin accepted the rebuke with a smile. "Yes. Forgive me. Sister Renn has boated down the Rifft River before, all the way to the dead city of Khorpis Kharn." He hesitated before continuing: the convent had a sister house located in Desmeé. "We believe the chrysalis is there."

The Abbess stared at Elizeh, who fidgeted with the end of her waist-long, dingy blonde braid. It amused Kuikin to see her quail. "Surely she's not the only one to have ever done so," the Abbess said.

Vertir tapped the hilt of his sword, but didn't answer.

"She's the only one we know who's done it and survived," Kuikin said.

"I don't wish to return," Elizeh said.

The birds fell through the branches in a violet rain to forage on the ground for food, commencing a raucous chatter so loud it momentarily halted all conversation. One landed on the end of the log. A mouth opened, a head twisted, and the bird disappeared in a shower of feathers as the others screeched alarm and scattered. The godling, chewing its meal, rose to its feet and stutter-stepped forward.

One of the boulders shifted and stood. It was a sister in gray robes. She trailed after the godling.

The Abbess lowered her voice. "What is your objection?"

Fear glimmered in Elizeh's eyes. "I went into that valley in search of riches and when I came out, I went in search of faith. I do not wish to return there, not for any reason. My life has turned aside on a different path."

"That new path includes a vow of obedience," the Abbess reminded her. She looked at Vertir. "Why do you reject her?"

He turned his back to the sister in the trees. "It's a fool's errand: the more fools with me, the more errors."

"It is neither foolish nor in error to despise gaud." To Kuikin, "And you want her because?"

"We will need a guide through the valley, someone we can trust. She and I have sojourned together before. We have a — "

"Mother," Elizeh protested.

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"Silence! Gaud is vile and repugnant, against the reason of nature." She tilted her head heavenward, squeezed her eyes shut as if saying a prayer. When she opened them again, she glared at Elizeh. "I order you to go with them, to aid in any way you can this venture they pursue, and to not return at peril of your soul's torment for a span of three lives until you see that abomination, if it exists, *dead!*"

Elizeh's back stiffened. "I will not do murder, Mother. Not anymore. That vow comes before that of obedience."

The Abbess pointed her staff at Kuikin and Vertir. "That's why you have them with you."

"He won't do murder either," Vertir said. "He's a scribe."

The Abbess stared at Kuikin. "Ah. So you have some useful training as a sorcerer then?"

"No," he replied honestly; one could not lie about sorcering. "I sparked no talent for it."

"You're scruffy for a scribe. Look more like a knee-capper, a back-alley man, with those shoulders and that face." She shook her tiny fist at Vertir and spoke in a harsh whisper. "Kill it."

The Abbess turned her back on them, staff thumping along the trail like a sexton's hammer pounding nails.

A CART LOADED with casks waited outside the convent's storehouse. Vertir patted the horse's flank and spoke to it. Kuikin climbed onto the cart's seat, taking hold of the reins. "Every third face here is from the southern provinces."

"Doesn't mean they're from Desmeé," Vertir said.

The beyant of Desmeé on the empire's southern frontier had long ruled itself. There were those, the current Bey among them, who would do anything to restore that independence. Kuikin and Vertir had been in Desmeé within the past year to steal the Bey's aegis and murder the sorcerer who'd created it. That should have checked the Bey's ambitions, but it hadn't.

"All it takes is one more loyal to family than faith to send off a warning," Kuikin said.

Vertir held his palms out in exasperation. "What warning? The Bey's

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men pursue the gaud chrysalis already! You're the one who wished to come here, and it's cost us days."

"She'll help us."

Vertir thrust his palms down. "You. Not us, you. Maybe. I don't know. I don't think she'll keep you warm at night, no matter what was once between — "

Elizeh swaggered around the corner of the building next to them, causing Vertir to fall silent and Kuikin to hold his reply. She had changed into traveling clothes. She shoved her bedroll in the back, checked the horses' harness and whispered to them, then climbed on to the cart seat. The wood creaked under her weight.

"Talking about me, huh?" she said to their silence. She bumped Kuikin aside and snatched the reins from his hands.

"I'll drive," he said.

She sneered at him. "If you do, it'll take us a week just to reach the front gate."

Vertir clambered onto the sideboard. "So you *have* traveled with him before."

"I don't know that you could call it traveling," she said. "He never got anywhere."

"We go way back," Kuikin insisted gruffly.

"Git!" Elizeh snapped the reins, and the big shaggy horses started, pausing at the limit of their harness until the whole cart lurched forward. The wheels rolled loudly over the stone pavement and down toward the fortress wall. They were picking up speed as they approached the narrow gate.

Kuikin gripped the seat. "Slow down!"

Vertir slid from the sideboard onto the seat. "Told you. It's easier to give him the reins."

"If you just ignore him, he shuts up after a while," she said and cracked the reins again. The horses were up to a quick trot and the wagon rolled easily over the smooth road.

"Watch out!" Kuikin covered his head as they rushed toward the wall. There wasn't enough room —

— but then the cart shot through the narrow gate with barely a foot to spare on either side. The guard yelled as he dived out of the way.

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"Nicely done," Vertir said, smiling in spite of himself.

Elizeh shrugged her big shoulders. "A foot or a mile, what's the difference? If you're clear, you're clear."

Kuikin twisted around. The guard was just picking himself up, staring back through the gate to see that no more carts were coming. "Sister Renn," he said.

"Yes?" The corner of her mouth twitched.

"Don't ever do that again!"

Vertir laughed at him.

The road dipped around a hill and they passed out of sight of the convent. A long range of scaly gray crags rose above the pine forest like a godling nested in the grass.

A pair of messenger pigeons flew over their heads from the direction of the convent. "It's likely nothing to do with us," Elizeh said, anticipating Kuikin's question.

The cart bucked hard as the dirt road grew uneven. She reined in the horses. Already they had to slow their pace.

Twilight fell long before they reached the imperial waystation for travelers, so Elizeh pulled the horses over in a clearing beside the road.

Vertir jumped from the wagon and set off on a circuit through the woods. Elizeh stepped down a little stiffly, walking over to look at the coal pit. "There hasn't been a fire in these stones for weeks."

While she unhitched the horses and rubbed them down, Kuikin unloaded their packs and supplies from the back of the wagon. He looked at the marks on the casks.

"Does the convent send more guards when it ships something other than vinegar?"

Elizeh hesitated. "That's not vinegar. The cask marks will be changed — the new imprint burned over that one — once we reach the sister house in Finis Opor. But I didn't tell you that."

His fingertips traced the glyph burned into the wood. His mouth had started to water. The convent's wines were famous. "That's an amazing transformation. True sorcery."

"Don't even think about tapping one."

By the time she finished and hobbled the horses where they could

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graze, Kuikin had started a fire. Vertir returned from the woods. "It's all clear close by."

Elizeh tossed her bedroll down by Kuikin's fire. Something in it chimed — metal ringing on metal.

"Doesn't that make it hard to sleep?" Vertir asked.

"Do you sleep easier unarmed?"

"I'm never unarmed." He cracked his knuckles, looked at Kuikin, and rolled his eyes.

Kuikin shrugged in reply, fed larger sticks into the flame.

Each layer of wool that Elizeh folded back revealed another blade, each a different type. Vertir hunkered down to look at them. "May I?" he asked.

She nodded in permission.

He poked at some small knives. "You use these for throwing?"

"Could," she said, "though I was never good at that. Preferred close work, and they're easy to hide. Some are decoys, but a couple of these can escape even a determined search."

He frowned doubtfully and picked up a nasty looking weapon as long as Kuikin's forearm. "That's an excellent ranger knife."

"I bought that in Osten years ago. It's more useful than your legion sword," she said, with a nod at the slightly curved sword in the scabbard at his waist. When he didn't say anything, she laughed. "Sure, your sword parries better and is more useful for slashing in a crowd, but I never went toe to toe against more than two hands at a time if I could help it."

"You don't have the luxury of choosing your enemies," he said. He set the ranger knife down and lifted a poignard, bending the long, thin blade. "That's superb Ferronian steel, but it's loose in the hilt, eh?"

She snatched it away from him and folded it back into the blanket. "And what if? May I never need to use it again."

"Well, if you brought them along to sell instead of use, I can help you get a fair price," Vertir said, stretching.

Kuikin waited for Elizeh to answer that but she didn't. Probably hadn't made up her own mind yet. His fingers were greasy with the fat he'd spread on the skillet. He rubbed them over the stubble on his cheeks and chin. Taking out the only knife he carried, a small thing for paring, he lifted it to scrape his face smooth.

"Don't do that," Elizeh said.

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"You never liked my beard."

"You're right, I hated it. Those bare patches on your cheeks look like mange. But if you let it grow, you'll look more like an adventurer when we reach Finis Opor and less like a constipated minor bureaucrat."

"That's not true — " Vertir interjected.

"Thank you!" Kuikin said.

" — he'll just look like a mangy, constipated bureaucrat."

Elizeh's laughter pealed across the glade.

Vertir grinned, then fell serious again. "The Bey's factors have been in Finis Opor for more than a month, gathering supplies and outfitting a small army."

"They'll need it," she said, nodding, "if they plan to go overland through the valley to Khorpis Kharn." She shuddered. "But were I planning that trip again, I'd go overland too. If they've been there a month, it'll be almost impossible to catch them. We'll need to wring every extra mile out of the day."

It was Vertir's turn to nod.

"Why not intercept them with a larger army on their return?"

"One's being gathered," Vertir answered.

"But by then the gaud will have full powers," Kuikin added. The smell of frybread rose up from the skillet as he flipped the batter. Elizeh's vows precluded her from eating any meat. "It'll be impossible to stop without great bloodshed."

"But it won't be ours," Elizeh said.

"Exactly," Vertir replied.

Kuikin had no answer to that.

The wagon sat motionless, just in sight of the waystation's bannered watchtower standing like a sentinel beside the road. Wasteland stretched out around them, all the way to the bandit-hiding hills, with the caravan to Finis Opor strung like a belt of jewels across its belly. The unrelenting sun above them made Kuikin's scraggly beard itch like lice.

"It's no wonder you've got bare patches on your cheeks," Elizeh said, "the way you keep scratching at them."

"It's no wonder you could never keep your lovers," Kuikin said, and regretted it at once even before she tensed and drew away from him.

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They were all on edge and had been for days as they'd traveled southward. As fast as they could go was not fast enough. Only the horses seemed to be happy standing still.

Vertir ran back along the rutted trail, returning from a small group of northbound travelers. Kuikin reached out a hand and pulled him up onto the sideboard. "So what's the delay?"

"Here it comes," Vertir said.

A minor bureaucrat made his way along the caravan, followed by a small gang of men who were as bow-legged and rangy-looking as bandits. The horses caught wind of them and fidgeted nervously.

The bureaucrat's face was red and straining. He looked at Kuikin like someone recognizing a wayward brother, then examined the casks in back. "We'll take four of these for the road tax."

"*What*?" Elizeh bellowed.

Kuikin put a hand on her arm. "That's unreasonable."

The bandit-types snickered. The bureaucrat swept his hand toward the watchtower. "I'm helpless in the matter. I have to collect my yearly quota when I can. The Dynast's army moves one direction, word of the Bey of Desmeé's sorcery comes another. Anyone can see that there will be war and no travel or trade for the rest of the year."

"Perhaps there won't be a war," Elizeh said.

The bureaucrat shrugged. "Who will prevent it?"

Who, indeed. Kuikin pulled out a small bag of coins. It clinked in his palm. "How much is the tax in gold?"

The bureaucrat rapped a knuckle on one of the casks and sniffed the wood. "It sometimes happens that the sisters mistakenly mark wine as vinegar."

When he looked up at them hopefully, Kuikin tossed the man a golden peacock. "For your personal trouble."

The bureaucrat named a more reasonable amount in coin, then added, "And one barrel of the vinegar. If you don't wish to pay, the notary-captain will be here within the month. You are welcome to wait and appeal your case to him."

His gang of assistants chuckled greedily. It would take them less than a month to relieve the travelers of their horses, coin, even the clothes from their backs.

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"That'll be fine," Kuikin said, placing a restraining hand on Elizeh's arm. He counted the coins while the bureaucrat beckoned two of his men to come unload the cask.

Vertir, who had been silent the whole time, jumped to the back of the wagon to help. As he selected the cask to unload, it slipped through his hands and fell on one man's foot. The second bent to lift it just as Vertir did the same and they knocked heads hard. The two bandits cursed angrily, but Vertir staggered backward, holding his head and swaying dizzily. The rest of the bureaucrat's gang laughed at them and carried the cask away.

"Why didn't you show the seal, the one you showed the Abbess?" Elizeh asked.

"Then we would have had to wait until the notary-captain arrived to verify it," Kuikin replied. He glanced at Vertir's grim face as he climbed back up to the front of the wagon. "Sometimes you have to compromise."

"I know that," Vertir told him. He had a red mark on his forehead where he'd hit the other man. "I wanted to hurt those two men much worse. But I compromised."

"You did give them a cask of vinegar?" Elizeh asked.

"One of the two you showed me." He looked at Kuikin. "We were planning on tricking you into tapping it."

Kuikin frowned at him. "That group you were talking to — "

"Mercenaries from Shin, caravan guards." Shin was Vertir's original home, an independent suzerainty on the empire's cold northern border. "They've heard rumors of the gaud incarnate."

"That's not possible," Kuikin said. "It's too soon!"

"Mercenaries hear all the news first," Elizeh said. "Especially if it means war. But this means we're too late!"

"Nah." Vertir shook his head. "From their descriptions, it sounds like they were talking of the last gaud to walk the Earth, Bahl-the-Gaud, who ruled from the Temple on Trembuell mound."

"I've been by Trembuell mound and didn't see any Temple," she said.

"That's because it was destroyed when Pence-the-Martyr murdered the gaud his master," Kuikin explained. "Later, the people of that region came and hauled away even the rubble so that no sign of that time remained."

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"I didn't know that's where Pence was martyred," she said. "Still, you're sure it wasn't the Temple in Desmeé?"

"I'm sure," Vertir said. "They spoke of a gaud perched atop the spire and that was at Trembuell."

Kuikin exhaled in relief. "Yes, had to be. Desmeé is a domed Temple, built during the very last years of the Interdynastum for a gaud chrysalis that it never received. There's no way the gaud could be there yet."

A cloud of blue butterflies, each a foot wide, caught his eye as they floated over the caravan and across the brown prairie in search of flowers elsewhere.

Vertir watched the butterflies pass too, then jerked his thumb toward the mercenaries. "Even the rumor of a new gaud is enough to send them running. They told me it's the end of the world we know. I've been invited to return with them to Shin, to rejoin my family and wait out this next winter of an age."

Elizeh nodded at the wedding bracelet on Vertir's wrist — a bead for each year, the colors showing only one bad year in more than a dozen. "So your wife is in Shin then?"

Instead of answering her, he tilted his head back and sang:

"She ruled in a castle carved of ice,
But her heart was colder still.
She summoned me once, she summoned me twice,
    But away I had run
    To the land of the sun,
And today I'm running still."

He jumped off the wagon, pointing to another group coming the opposite direction. "I'll go see what else I can learn."

When he had gone, Elizeh said, "That was very odd."

Kuikin shrugged. "He never speaks of his family when we're traveling on behalf of the Notary-General."

"I thought wedding beads were a Pyune custom."

"His wife's from Pyune. He took it up because of her."

"Ah."

The tail end of the northbound caravan was passing by. The wagons

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ahead of them surged forward again. Kuikin put his arm around Elizeh, to point this out, but she knocked his hand out of the way as she picked up the reins.

"Our habits change with our circumstances," she said. "You should know that."

THE UNWALLED and undefended city of Finis Opor (which its citizens called Tyrn, though nomads from the desert called it The Golden Threshold or sometimes Stench) straggled like a scab across a rocky knee of hills. Jagged roads scarred the landscape north to the Empire, south and east into the desert, and west around the valley of Divinrifft over the mountains to the sea.

A spring flowed out of the hills and streamed along a low bank beside the city's marketplace. Children serpented through the umbrella'd carts, pointing at Kuikin's beard and dashing away.

The boatman had only a few curly hairs on his dark chin. He ignored Kuikin and resumed dragging his small craft away from the water's edge.

"Wait, wait," Kuikin repeated in the merchant pidgin. "Buy boat."

The scrawny boatman shook his head. "Buy boat not." He shifted his netbag full of fish to his back and tilted his pole downstream. "You treasure to hunt, yes? In go to valley, yes?"

"Yes," Kuikin said. "Yes, exactly."

"In go to valley not, come back not!" He resumed his walk.

An uneven row of low, discolored buildings with gaps between them like bad teeth stood opposite the market. Kuikin saw Vertir pause at the corner of one, look both directions, then come over and stand in the boatman's way.

"What's the news?" Kuikin asked.

"The Bey has soldiers gathered in a rented villa on the heights above the city. Few hundred maybe, with a carriage to escort the gaud." The boatman stepped one way, then the other, trying to get around Vertir. "Is this our boat?"

"Not yet. Have they departed into the valley?"

The boatman spewed a fountain of vile-sounding words in his own

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incomprehensible tongue before switching back to the pidgin. "Move you, yes!"

He attempted to pass, but Vertir stepped in front of him again. "Sell you fish, yes? Sell fish?"

The man named a price. Vertir pulled out a string of coins and counted off an amount ten times too high. The man's eyes widened. He held his netbag out eagerly.

Vertir extended the coins, then retracted them from the other man's reach. "Fish to come with boat, yes? Boat we to throw fish back. Fish swim away."

"Fish dead, crazy you!" the man said, but they commenced a serious set of negotiations. The late morning sun washed over the rooftops and trees, and a new wave of people swam through the marketplace. Kuikin watched the groups form and split around the islands of carts; across the way, Elizeh appeared in a gap between the houses and scanned the crowd. He lifted his hand and she hurried over to him.

A small man paused at the corner of another building. "I couldn't give him the slip," she said. "Is that our boat?"

"Not yet," Kuikin said. "Who is he?"

"One of the honey climbers from the valley. They," she hesitated, "helped me the last time I was here."

"How so?"

"By showing me the path out of the valley and by offering not to kill me if I departed immediately and left everything behind."

The man stepped out into the open, shielding the light from his eyes. He was small and slender, clad only in a loincloth, with large flat feet, webbed hands, and the ridge-lines of vestigial gills along his ribcage. He stepped toward them, hesitated, and disappeared into the shadows again.

Kuikin caught his breath. "If he was tattooed, I'd take him for one of the sea folk in a second."

"That's what I thought too, the first time I saw them," Elizeh said. "Once you cross the mountains, it's not that far to the coast. But they live in the trees as far as I could tell, speak a language wholly unlike the sea folk's. They hunted with blowguns. The darts were tipped with poison taken from the bees."

"Do you think they'd rather help or hinder a gaud?"

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"The honey climbers? I have no idea. They let no one take anything from the valley that can't be replaced. Honey's the only thing they bring up to the city to trade. They," she hesitated again, "treated me well the last time, considering the state I was in. But they promised to kill me if I returned."

"They probably say that to everyone," Vertir interjected as he joined them. He held the bag of fish and dragged the lightweight boat beside him. "It's bark and branches. Not much. He'll build himself a newer one to replace this before we're a day downriver."

"Sure," Kuikin said, "but we'll already be a day downriver."

Elizeh examined it skeptically. "When I left the wagon at the sister house, they told me that the Bey's men had departed for the valley to welcome the gaud five days ago."

"What?" Kuikin looked toward the stream.

"Archsorceror, thirty men, and local guides?" Vertir asked.

"Yes. The Mother also told me the guides were unscrupulous men who would steal the supplies and leave before they were too deep into the valley."

"That's what I heard too. It still doesn't leave us much time to catch up with them, even by the river route. Did you hear anything about the tree folk?"

"We were just discussing them," Kuikin said.

"One followed me to the market place," Elizeh explained.

"A handful have come out of the valley lately, but nobody's sure why. The Bey's men tried to hire them for guides, but they wouldn't do it."

"They never do," Elizeh said.

They all three stood silently staring at each other for a moment. The crowd of people in the market broke on the rock of their motionlessness, staring at them as they passed.

Elizeh and Vertir bent to take hold of the boat. She said, "Kuikin, you don't need to — " at the same moment that Vertir said, "The two of you don't need to go any further."

They set the boat down again.

"You don't know what you're facing," she said. "You'll never survive the river without a guide."

"I've survived a lot of rivers without a guide," Vertir told her, "and worse than that, and all of it without you."

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Kuikin grabbed the bow and dragged it to the water. They were still yammering as he shoved it out into the stream.

"The Bey's men are getting closer to their goal by the moment," he said. "I'll go on without you, if I must."

They threw their gear aboard and joined him.

"This is your last chance to turn back," Elizeh said at the same moment Vertir told him, "You could stay here, Kuikin."

He leaned into the pole, pushing off from the bank.

ALL THE REST of that day they took turns poling down the river. The banks, though far apart, grew slowly higher on either side and huge trees overhung the water, their branches draped with monkey spiderwebs. The spiders themselves dropped on threads to peer at the boat, chatter at it, and toss twigs at them. More disturbing were the glares of the fishermen they passed as they entered a narrow lake where the river widened before it passed a gap between twinned bluffs.

"The lake is too deep for us to pole across," Elizeh said. "And after that, the river much too swift. Over there."

Vertir followed her directions to the water's verge.

"The trees here are...," Kuikin faltered.

"Strange?" offered Elizeh. "Go in closer."

"Wrong," Vertir said, but he went.

Trunks dwarfed, elongated, hunchbacked, bloated; familiar barks pimpled and rent; leaves taffy-stretched, stripped, shrunken, and mottled. Everything at once looked familiar and distorted, Kuikin thought, like the sort of inbred relatives families kept locked away from strangers.

"Those," Elizeh said. "There, that one right there."

The boat bumped against half-submerged roots. Vertir raised the pole to fend off the monkey spiders nearby; as it lifted out of the water, something slithered off the end and splashed away.

"What are we looking for?" Kuikin asked.

"These," Elizeh said, grabbing a triangular piece of bark peeling loose from a trunk. The boat wobbled, she tugged, and it came free with a loud crack. Second and third pieces were less weathered, and she had to hack them loose with her ranger knife. "We'll use these to paddle."

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Kuikin marked the Sun just above the horizon, the long shadows cast by the cliffs, and the distant, dull roar of water. "Should we find a place on shore to camp for the night?"

"Not unless you want to wake up in a wedding dress," she said, a reference to the way the spiders wrapped up unwary travelers in silk.

"I've never looked good in dresses," Vertir said, whacking an aggressive monkey spider. Other spiders clambered out on the tips of the branches and squirted sticky balls of web at them. He batted a ball from the air. "Can you move us a little faster?"

Kuikin took up one of the paddles and vigorously muscled the water out of the way until they passed from under the trees. Once they were on the open lake, Vertir did the same, with less splashing and more grace. They made slow progress at first, but then the craft slipped into the current and shot forward. The Sun sat like a boil on the horizon when they approached the gap.

Their speed seemed to double as they passed between the brown heights of the cliffs, and above the thundering from just ahead, Elizeh shouted, "This is going to be a little rough!"

Kuikin gripped the flimsy wale and shut his eyes.

He felt a sudden weightlessness as the boat dropped away beneath him, the spray of water and then a hard shock against his legs as they hit, and his eyes snapped open, and waves poured in over the sides soaking him as they dropped again, slammed into something, tilted sideways, dropped, plunged through foam and spray, lodged hard against something, turned with the tow, slipped free, and then cascaded down a final staircase of cold, black water and *whump* came to rest in a current that, though as fast as the one before the gap, seemed blessedly languid.

Elizeh had grinned and whooped the whole time, driving them forward with her paddle. She pulled them downstream now.

"That was fun," said Vertir. "So is that the big danger?"

"Oh, no," said Elizeh. "That's the easy one. After this, it turns very rough. At least it's a fast trip."

Kuikin watched the water slosh in the bottom of the boat. It seemed to be getting deeper. "I think we're leaking."

The river ran high, coursing against the rocky cliffs, scouring the steep slopes where the cliffs fell back, and drowning the few wide spots

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with stands of trees. Stars glittered in the sky when they finally found a narrow sandbar for their camp.

"Well," Kuikin said, climbing out of the boat, "it's flat enough so we won't roll into the stream."

Vertir stomped around, the sand sloshing under his feet. "It's a big wet sponge. If I had an animal, and it picked here to sleep, I'd kill it to keep it from ever breeding again."

"That's not funny." Elizeh glowered. "And trust me, it's the best we're going to find tonight."

She made the oblations required of her order, writing her prayers in the air while Kuikin and Vertir unloaded the boat and flipped it to drain.

"Who wants cold fish?" asked Vertir, holding up the netbag he had purchased that morning. It stank. "There's not enough wood here to start a fire."

"I'll set free the dead," Elizeh said solemnly, taking it from his hands.

"Fish dead, crazy you," Vertir said as she emptied the bag into the river with a blessing. But he didn't try to stop her.

Afterward they ate their meal cold, including uncooked flour mixed with river water. Elizeh unbraided her waist-length hair to let it dry, unfolded her blanket, and removed the knives one by one. "The boat's likely to tip over any time," she said. "Anything you absolutely need to have ought to be on you somewhere."

"I'll take care of the stores," Kuikin said.

Vertir hunched over, solid as a boulder in the night. A tap of two beads slipped into the silence. He was counting his wedding years, performing his own oblations. Skipping the memory of the one bad year, if Kuikin knew him.

"Why are you doing this?" Elizeh asked him.

Vertir's chin lifted. A piece of starlight shot across his eyes and burned out. "What do you mean?"

"You're from Shin, an ally of the Empire, but no part of it. Your wife is from Pyune, across the sea. Why?"

Breath rushed out his nose. "I wonder the same thing sometimes. But I took an oath to serve. And this service has been demanded of me."

"Demanded because it is too much to ask. You are still a free man and not a slave. No one would think less of you had you turned back."

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He forced a laugh. "Now you tell me, after it's too late."

Kuikin watched her silhouette as she carefully retied her braid. "What about you?" he asked.

"I took an oath also," she said. "Seven of them."

"But why?"

Silence but for the water, then, "Four of us planned to steal the treasures of Khorpis Kharn, at the bottom of this valley, where this river ends. We were going to be rich. Instead, everyone ended up dead but me. While I recovered — " She laughed. "Well, since I was already chaste and poverished, it didn't tax me to take the other five vows and join the Sisterhood. Besides the righteous path appealed to me. I was sick to heart of killing things." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And now that path brings me back here. Perhaps I was never intended to escape the first time."

"Perhaps the Great Balance of Souls owes you a debt and seeks to repay it," Kuikin said.

"I never argue faith with the faithless, Kick."

She only called him Kick when she was mad at him. "But — "

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm sorry, Elizeh — "

"My name's Renn now. It changed. I've changed."

He watched her, seeing nothing but a shadow among shadows, until Vertir said, "And you? Why are you here?"

Kuikin glanced at Vertir, then back to Elizeh. "That's a stupid question. I am where I am."

He flopped down on his damp blankets and rolled over in them.

The walls of the canyon constricted their horizons to worn and pitted stone, straggling malformed vegetation, parched sky, and the passage from one churning, boulder-strewn rapids across brief stretches of level water to the next violent drop.

By late afternoon of the second day, they were battered, bruised, and exhausted by the difficult portages around the worst of the waterfalls. Kuikin crouched in the middle of the boat, soaked and sick, when he heard an awful roar ahead.

"Are those falls?" he shouted.

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"Gorge," Elizeh answered from the bow. "No way around it but through. But it's the last bad passage left."

The boat rocketed through the overhanging cliffs, where the surge and rush of water reverberated at deafening volumes. The current whipped them toward one wall, then the other, tossing them like an unbroken horse, leap to leap through a series of small, rough rapids. Somehow they stayed to the middle path, taking the water where it frothed whitest, until at last they emerged from the long chute. Elizeh used her paddle to fend them away from the massive rocks that littered that part of the river.

Kuikin clutched the sides of the boat so hard his hands ached, bracing against an impact. "Watch out!"

"Relax!" she shouted back, her voice tense as they shot through the gap between two boulders. "Clear is clear!"

Then the boat lifted into the air and dropped onto a third rock, just barely submerged. It landed with a wrenching crack, scraped sideways, and flipped, dumping them.

Chill water surged over Kuikin as he tumbled upside down, spilled into his nose, his throat. The current swept him away, up into air, around boulders, under, up, and then under again. The bag with their supplies, slung over his shoulder, snagged on something, the cord choking him, and though he slipped out of it somehow, the water bashed him with its mob of fists and he tumbled over and over, thrashing without surfacing. He felt dizzy, light-headed, sure he was about to drown, when something hard lashed the side of his face, then lashed him again. Elizeh's braid! He grabbed for it, for her, and felt her hand clamp onto his arm and yank him sputtering into the air.

She spilled him onto a ledge, where he lay coughing, gagging, drooling. Vertir's voice, downstream, "Are you all right?"

"We are," shouted Elizeh. "You?"

A pause. "I hurt my shoulder."

There was no comfortable shore to offer them respite, only a vertical wall of rock on one side and a steep slope on the other that was covered with nail-trees and some kind of poisonous vine that whipped its hooked tips at them when they came too close.

Holding tight to one another, Kuikin and Elizeh slipped off the rock

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and let the turbulent current take them away. He flowed over the rocks. He was noticing how the moss tickled his bare arms when his head kicked back, knocking against the stones, and then they were both clear, kicking hard to make it to the safety of Vertir's perch.

The muscle on Vertir's jaw bulged in suppressed pain and tension. He hunched over, gripping his left forearm away from his body. "Arm wedged between two rocks. But no bones sticking out through the skin, eh."

He grimaced with each word. "You all right?" Kuikin asked.

"No," he gasped. "Hurts like a dragon's bite."

"We lost a boat there in the gorge last time, too," Elizeh said, looking back. "At least no one drowned this time."

"Don't tempt me," Vertir said.

Kuikin scanned the other direction, downstream. "Look, it's hung up on that curve." The boat floated upside down, wobbling in the eddies.

"We better recover it," Elizeh said, easing into the water.

"Can you float?" Kuikin asked Vertir.

"Maybe. Sure. I don't know. If I sink, don't try to bring me up again."

They slipped off the ledge and let the river carry them away again, swiftly still, but not as rough. Elizeh swam ahead, trying to reach the overturned boat as the current dragged it on. Vertir's nose and mouth were barely above the surface. Kuikin put a hand on Vertir's good arm, to pull him along.

"Gah!" Vertir screamed. "Don't!"

Kuikin let go, seeing that it hurt, but stayed close by.

They chased the boat along the swift rush-feathered stream, catching it where a narrow, muddy island split the river. Kuikin stood ready to help while Vertir sloshed onto the bank, still clutching his arm. Elizeh dragged the boat ashore. When she paused to rub her lower back, Kuikin noticed blood staining her thigh. "Are you hurt too?"

"Nnn," she muttered.

"I asked, are you hurt?"

"No," she said firmly. "I'm flying the red flag. I'm hailing the crimson brigand. I'm feeding the Moon. *Understand*?"

A couple heartbeats. "Oh."

Vertir laughed at him, grimaced with the pain.

"The wale's busted," Elizeh said of the boat. "It sags like a swaybacked

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horse and I don't have anything I need to fix it. We still have one paddle but — Vertir!"

He had fallen to his knees. She came over. "We're going to need to bend your elbow here," she said, taking hold of his wounded arm, "and make a sling through your shirt."

He nodded, his nostrils flaring as he controlled his breathing, stifled the agony. When she moved his arm gently closer to his body, his face contorted.

"Are — " she said.

"Go on," he told her through his teeth.

"Kuikin! I need a swath of cloth, long."

Taking out his little knife, Kuikin cut into the hem of his shirt, tearing a strip loose lengthwise while she braced the bad arm. He handed it over to her, and she wrapped the arm against Vertir's body, immobilizing it.

"How's that?" she asked.

"It'll do," Vertir said, exhaling.

"I should have padded it first, but we lost all our blankets."

"I lost my bow, quiver, javelin too," Vertir said. "I had the bow, but that's what jammed in the rocks."

"And my ranger knife," she said, tipping the empty sheath. "But I still have some of the others."

Kuikin's hand shot to his neck, to where he'd had the bag. "Our supplies."

"What? That's all you had to — " She bit off her words.

"I kept a little back for us here." Vertir patted the pouch at his waist with his good arm. "Should we eat a bite now? Get our strength up and keep moving."

"Good idea," Kuikin said, taking the proffered dried meat and tearing off a piece with his teeth.

Elizeh shook her head. "Eating meat violates my sixth vow."

"You take a vow against starving to death?" Vertir asked.

But Kuikin said, "That's true only if you killed it. The path allows for the consumption of meat in special circumstances where the beast died of natural causes, just as it permits you to wear the lizard-scale robes."

"Don't tell me what my faith allows, Kick," she said.

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"You'll need your strength," he growled at her, holding up the strip of meat. "Trust me, this animal was struck by lightning and cooked in its own skin, reduced in a split second to the state you see it in now. I swear it. The divine will of the world clearly intended it for your sustenance, so eat it!"

She turned away from him to try to repair the boat.

THE BOAT LIMPED ALONG half under water, moving barely as fast as the current. Kuikin and Elizeh took turns with the paddle, but they could do little to hurry it.

By midmorning the next day the cliffs had fallen away revealing a great bowl of a valley, with strange trees that stretched a hundred feet and more into the sky. The air was warm, oppressive, vibrating with a grating hum. The mountains were no more than a vague darkness seen through distant haze.

"Why didn't the Dynast send anyone after the gaud chrysalis sooner?" Elizeh asked.

Vertir started to shrug, winced, stopped. "I hadn't even heard rumors of it until the day we set out to meet you."

"No one knew," Kuikin said. "No one even suspected, until the Bey's men arrived in Finis Opor and commenced first their inquiries, then their preparations. The Notary-General dispatched us immediately upon reading the report."

"How does he even know one's here then?" she asked. "It's been so long since a gaud last walked the Earth. Why, hearing the rumors, would he believe them?"

Vertir looked at Kuikin. "The Bey has used sorcery in attempted rebellion before. Enough for the Notary-General to take any report seriously."

"And," Kuikin said, "this explains other facts. One of the Bey's most powerful sorcerers disappeared a few years ago. Rumor had it that he was murdered for studying the doctrine of Transfiguration and for his ambition. Now we think that the rumor was planted, that instead his studies and his ambitions led him here, with the Bey's blessings, so that — "

Several dark shapes buzzed out of the sky, diving at their heads.

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Kuikin ducked, throwing his hands up to defend himself. "Bees!"

"Shhh!" hissed Elizeh, freezing her position. "Leave them alone and they won't bother you."

Vertir said, "Did anybody tell them that?"

The bees were saffron-and-charcoal blurs, bigger than fists with glistening stingers the size of small knives. Their feet brushed the top of Kuikin's head, wings fanning his hair. Kuikin, who'd had bad experiences with stings, hesitated to trust Elizeh's advice. He draped one hand over the side of the boat, and tried to paddle them away.

A moment later the insects were gone. Elizeh shuddered and sighed. "We lost the second member of our party to one of the bees."

Kuikin was about to ask how it had happened when something brushed against his fingers. He looked into the water and saw a bunch of dark shapes, some as long as his hand, darting around the boat. His stomach rumbled. "It's a school of fish. I think I can catch one...."

Elizeh slammed the paddle into the water. "Those are leeches — make sure none get in the boat."

Kuikin yanked his hand out of the river and scanned the water filling the crippled craft. It was empty.

"Look," Vertir said.

A great gray wall of stone loomed dead ahead of them, still miles away but higher than the treetops, crossing the course of the river, running off toward the mountains in either direction.

"How does the river flow around that?" Vertir asked

"It doesn't," Elizeh said. "Those are the cliffs of Khorpis Kharn."

The falls rumbled like an avalanche down an endless mountainside, mist in the air like a cloud of dust. Elizeh steered their boat to the shore.

"But how can there be waterfalls at the bottom of a cliff?" Vertir asked.

"The river flows into limestone caverns at the base," Elizeh said. "No one knows where it comes out again, or if it does."

Kuikin checked himself again for leeches as he climbed onto the river's bank. "Scrolls in the Dynast's archive say that the ancients who lived here sent all sizes of things into the falls, checking the rivers on the other side of the mountain, and even the sea itself without ever finding them again."

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"When was that?" Vertir grasped Elizeh's hand and she helped him ashore. His pain already seemed much diminished.

"In the days of the first gauds," Kuikin said.

"In the days," Elizeh said, "when sorcerors defied the natural winding of the path, awoke the world-dragon in its lair, and tugged its beard." She pointed above the falls. "What's that, Kuikin? We didn't know, when we saw it the last time."

A thin spine of stone protruded from the face of the cliff, spreading out into a flat top just below the rim of the city.

"Condemned men were lowered to that platform," he said. "If they dived clear of the rocks and swam free to the river's edge, they were permitted to live."

The three of them regarded the length of the drop, the breadth of the stones, the power of the current. "Did any ever make it?" she asked.

"Some of the scrolls say yes, some of them say no. They're all of dubious provenance."

Vertir was the first to turn away from the prisoner's perch. "We're not finished here yet. We should keep moving."

They carried the boat into the trees and hid it under the thick, leafy bushes. Two steps back and even they could not see where it was hidden. It was a futile gesture. They could not use it again. A shadow fell over them. The distant hum in the trees quieted. First Kuikin, then the other two turned and stared at the mist-obscured cliff, the towering skirt of trees, the pale gleam of sunset on the distant city.

"Has anyone ever survived killing a gaud?" Elizeh asked.

"Some of the scrolls say yes," Kuikin said, "some say — "

Vertir interrupted: "No, no one ever did. Pence-the-Martyr was turned into a shadow of black ash on the wall."

"That's what I've always heard too," Elizeh said. She waited a moment. "Kuikin, remember how when we left home, at the edge of the village, you said we'd stay together until we died?"

Vertir turned away, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, permitting them a small space of privacy.

"Yes," Kuikin whispered. "And I know I left you when I went to study with the scribes. I'm sorry about that, El — Renn."

He would only think of her as Renn from now on. He couldn't change

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anything in the past, couldn't make those things better, but he could do that much.

"It's all right now," she said.

The sky above them was still bright, so Vertir drew his sword and began hacking a way through the undergrowth to the wall.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Renn asked, but Kuikin knew better. Vertir controlled his pain by pushing against it.

"It's fine," Vertir said, grunting with each swing.

"My ranger knife would serve better," Renn said.

"Sure, if you hadn't lost it."

"Let me find something to beat back the branches." She reached for a long stick. When she touched it, it twitched, leapt up, and ran away past Kuikin. He jumped.

"Persuade it to come back," Vertir said, slashing one-handed, sweating. "Maybe it can beat down the branches on its own."

The deeper they pressed on, the thicker the forest became. They could hear large shapes moving only five or ten feet away from them, scattering out of the way of Vertir's sword, yet they never glimpsed any creature. He hacked slower, but harder in the gloom, attempting to frighten them away, until his blade clanged, throwing sparks as the tip snapped off.

"Here's the cliff wall," he announced. He considered his broken sword, then whacked another branch in frustration.

"Then the steps must be this way," Renn said. She bulled ahead, following the cliff a short way until they came to a broad, overgrown platform carved in the stone.

A narrow stairway zigzagged up the cliff face, becoming a faint line that disappeared in darkness before the summit.

"Shall we keep going?" Vertir asked.

Kuikin gauged the width of the stair and wasn't so sure, but Renn said, "It's too easy to fall. We should camp here, rest, and try it in the morning."

Vertir chopped away the brush, while Renn ripped things up by hand, and Kuikin tore down vines — petals from large fragrant blossoms rained over his face — to create a tiny clearing.

Renn declined when Vertir shared the last of his stores. The dried

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meat turned to rawhide in Kuikin's mouth when Vertir asked Renn, "So where's your home, where the two of you grew up?"

"Kuikin's never told you?"

"He doesn't talk much about himself."

She shrugged. "It's a little village in the Pong Mountains about six days' journey from the river — "

"The Ankee River?"

" — right, the Ankee. Town so small it didn't have a prefect or even a notary. The year that Kuikin and I left, our mother — "

"Wait!" He laughed. "You're brother and sister?"

Kuikin choked, covered it with a cough. "More like cousins," he blurted as she mumbled, "Half-brother."

But Vertir was laughing too hard to hear them. "Here all along, I thought the two of you had been lovers. Kuikin usually grows this mopey and sullen around his former lovers."

Kuikin said nothing, denial the equivalent of confession. But he thought he could see Renn's cheeks flush as bright red as two coals in the night.

"It wasn't like that exactly," she said. "I mean, it was such a small village. And we were so isolated, so ignorant — "

Vertir's chuckles suddenly ceased.

"It's a long story," Kuikin said.

"So how did you and Kuikin both start working for the Notary-General?" she asked, abruptly trying to change the subject.

It was Vertir's turn to say nothing. That had been the year of the dark bead. Finally, he too said, "It's a long story."

A damp breeze stirred through the trees, brushing over them, rustling tendrils that tickled their skin.

"We should all just get some rest," Kuikin said.

"That's a good idea," Vertir said while Renn added, "We'll need it for the climb tomorrow."

They stretched out, close to one another, up against the base of the cliff and away from the unceasing purr and rustle that came from the trees. Kuikin's back pressed up against Renn. He tried not to think of the past. He had become quite good at it. He lay there for a long, long time, silent, awake, not thinking.

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"Kuikin," Renn growled, "keep your hands to yourself."

Resentment flushed through him — he wasn't that ignorant anymore. He hated ignorance. He folded his hands under his arms and curled up in a ball. "My hands are to myself."

"I'm serious, get them off my leg — Kick!"

"I said my hands are to myself. And stop calling me Kick!"

"She said 'tick,' you dungwit," Vertir cried. "'Tick'!"

Something crept on finger-sized feet over the back of Kuikin's neck. He screamed and jumped up. "Ticks!"

A soupbowl-size bug tumbled from him; he booted it into the brush. He knocked another from his leg.

"One has its fangs in my thigh," Vertir said.

"Don't kill it," Renn said, flinging another into the dark.

"Let it be reborn into something that doesn't bite!"

He pulled his knife and pried it loose while Kuikin spun around kicking at anything that moved. "How'd you not notice it?"

"It was," a shell cracked, "a very slight pain compared to others."

"Moon's up," Renn said. "Perhaps we should ascend."

THE STEPS SWITCHBACKED vertically up the wall, sometimes a foot wide, sometimes a foot and a half, obscured by the far-reaching branches of the trees, overgrown by vines, cracked by roots, slick with mist, worn, the sheer rock rising on one side, dropping off the valley floor without handholds on the other.

Renn went first, since she had been this way before, with Vertir in the middle because of his injured shoulder. They made slow progress as Renn cleared one step after another.

Kuikin hated heights more than he hated speed: he inched along, finding one purchase for his fingers in the stone after the next, never glancing down. Not being able to see the ground below in the darkness only made it worse. "Can't you move a little faster?" Kuikin said, sweating, heart skipping, as the breeze jostled him.

"The moth rushes into the flame," she answered, and continued testing each foothold carefully before moving on.

They had reached the spot where the treetops were thickest, limbs

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crowding the steps. The branches broke when leaned on, snapped back when pushed out of the way, always hiding the path. The three of them pushed on through. Something shook the leaves, bent them aside, and for a split second, human-sized eyes peered at Kuikin, reflecting moonlight from the sky. Kuikin blinked.

"Here's the gap," Renn said quietly.

"What?" asked Kuikin. The eyes had disappeared. He thought he had imagined them, but was ready to ask Vertir and Renn.

"The gap in the stairs. Too wide to step across. You'll have to jump up. The landing is a couple feet higher." Her hand patted the stone and then she hopped, grunting as she pulled herself upright. "I'm holding my hand out — "

"Got it," Vertir said as he followed her. Then, "Kuikin — "

Kuikin nodded. "With that shoulder you can't catch me. Just move back. Give me some room."

Their shadows retreated higher up the stairs. He leaned over, tracing the gap along the wall with his fingers. After one false start, he gathered himself and leapt. His knee struck the stone, but he clutched at vines, pulling himself upright, panting.

"Tell me," he said to distract himself, trying to stop shaking enough to go on. "What will we find atop the staircase, in the city itself?"

"I don't know," Renn admitted. "This is as high as we made it. My," a long pause dropped here, "last companion fell off the cliff just back there. I returned to the ground to help him, but he was dead from the fall. The honey climbers captured me then."

"Should I just leap now?" Vertir said.

Her arm shot back; pinning him to the wall, and his right hand folded over hers, prepared to pry her fingers loose.

"Don't do that again," he said.

"Don't even say that in jest!"

"He doesn't mean it," Kuikin said.

She released her grip. "Not even in jest. We hurried last time and failed. I'll get us to the top this time. Be patient."

Kuikin had no patience, but neither did he have any choice except turning back and the prospect of looking down even to place his feet was too much to bear. Eyes lifted, he continuously remeasured their sluggish

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progress to the top, and when he could do that no longer he lowered his gaze merely to the next turn, and when that too became unbearable, he looked only to the next step, to the feet in front of his, and when that too became an ordeal, his breath fluttering in his chest, his fingertips dripping so much sweat he could no longer grip the stone, they turned a corner, took a few final steps, and the cliff disappeared as a wide platform spread before them, a starless slab beneath the slab of sky. They had reached the summit.

Renn and Vertir turned to look back at their ascent, but Kuikin hurried away from the edge. The forest grew up here as well, a dark blanket that covered the ruins. He thought he glimpsed pale stone here and there, but wasn't sure.

"I could defend this against all the soldiers of the Bey," Vertir was saying to Renn. "If only I had unbroken weapons and a left arm healed enough to parry with."

"Are those the Bey's soldiers over there?"

Kuikin whipped around at Renn's question and ran to the cliff. A fire glowed through the treetops below. "Dear gaud, we're just ahead of them. Quick, let's find the chrysalis and flee before they arrive."

Renn spun. "From down there, I thought I saw — "

Vertir started toward the ruins. "We'll split up — "

"No," Kuikin said. "Stay together. These old cities were laid out by geomancers. We'll find the temple at the conjunction of the dragon lines. The gaud will be there, needing to draw on that power himself."

"But how — "

"Where — "

"This way," he said, and took off, looking for any slope that led upward, scanning the distant horizon for the looming peaks of mountains and the intersections between them.

Through arches that pierced crumbling walls, around the pillared corners of palaces subsumed by jungle, up antique boulevards whose heavy paving stones still held clear a way forward, until they discovered in the heart of the city a vast dome rising through the canopy like a full Moon. They searched the perimeter until they found an entrance, then went inside.

And nothing.

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No light penetrated the nocturnal silence of the dome; no sound stirred within. They walked like blind beggars with their hands along the wall, feeling things crunch and break beneath their feet. The air had a dry, dusty, lifeless smell.

Vertir asked, "So what do we do — "

"SO WHAT?" echoed in the vast space around them.

Something rustled in the dome above them when the sound faded. "It'll be dawn soon," Kuikin whispered in each one's ear. "We have to wait."

They sat together with their backs against the wall.

Kuikin jerked awake, heart rolling like thunder, when Vertir jabbed him. He started to shout but his friend pressed a finger to his lips and pointed upward.

They must have fallen asleep. The Sun was long risen, light pouring through the clerestory arches, illuminating the chapel. The famed riches of Khorpis Kharn were only devastation. The mosaics, even the plaster, had been torn from the walls. Some of the damage appeared recent, fresh gashes in long-defaced murals. Everything but the structure itself had been smashed.

Kuikin scarcely noticed. Three stories up, in the dome's center, bathed in sunlight, hung a huge translucent chrysalis.

"Well, there it is," Vertir said. "Can we go now?"

Renn rose to her feet. "It hasn't hatched," she whispered.

Kuikin's heart pounded harder as he stood beside her. "All we have to do is knock it down. And kill it."

"How?" asked Vertir. "With what?" That stopped them all. As they pondered those questions, Vertir stood and paced, seeking an answer. "If we have to, we can scale the outside of the building somehow, use some kind of pole to reach through the clerestory to knock it loose."

The colors inside the chrysalis swirled. The thing twitched on the slender thread that suspended it aloft.

Kuikin hefted a chunk of stone. "Perhaps we can encourage its fall from here."

His first throw missed wildly and the missile crashed back to the floor of the temple, scattering the pieces of fallen mosaic that had crunched

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underfoot the night before. Vertir's throw came closer. His second throw caused him to grunt in suppressed pain. The rock glanced off the chrysalis with no effect.

"We need to head outside or find another route up there," Kuikin said.

Vertir stared hard at Renn. "Maybe if I had a good throwing knife, I might be able to do it some harm first."

"Ah," Renn said. She hesitated, then produced two knives from her sleeves. She frowned, then handed them over.

"I'd have asked for a bow if I thought you had one."

His first throw bounced off the chrysalis and fell back among them, causing Kuikin to dive out of its way. His second throw stuck in the side of the sac.

The chrysalis vibrated. The knife wobbled and fell.

Vertir stepped back. "That's not going to work. We need to approach it more closely."

"No," Renn said. "Look!"

A blood-red drop bubbled up where the knife had stuck, swelling outward. Inside the chrysalis, colors swirled like a dust devil in the painted desert. The bubble burst and scarlet liquid rolled down the sac, fell forever through the air, and splashed on the floor near them like water breaking from a pregnant woman's womb.

The swirling stopped. A crack appeared in the chrysalis, split open, and a second gush of liquid poured out, followed by a steady drip, echoing *tap tap tap* as it fell.

"Maybe," Vertir said, "that wasn't such a good idea."

The split tore open, and a pair of double-wings unfolded out, then six legs gripped the bottom of its former cage and flipped upside down, hanging there as it fanned itself dry.

"So what will you do now?" whispered Renn.

Kuikin didn't know.

Vertir had already retrieved the pair of knives and held one ready to throw. "Maybe if we leave it alone, it won't bother us."

The gaud lifted its head toward them. An almost human face peered out exuberantly from behind the oversized eyes and long, needle-like proboscis. "Oh," he rasped, "it's quite too late for that."

As the three of them backstepped toward the door, the gaud hissed and

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flagstones leapt up in a spray of dust and broken tile, flipping end over end, shedding chips of stone with every clunk, to build a waist-high wall around them.

"Sheep in the pen," the gaud panted, fanning his wings. His head angled toward the door. "It will only be a few moments."

Vertir went to leap over the stones, but one slammed down where he stood and he was only just able to dodge it. He tensed to leap again, but the stones reared up against him.

"The next one will crush you to bloody pulp," the gaud said.

Kuikin felt something poke around in his thoughts, like a knife stirring a bowl of soup. The hairs tingled all along the back of his neck and hackled on his arms. He looked at his companions, wondering if the fear showed as clearly in his face as it did in theirs.

The gaud inhaled sharply. "Yes, here, here."

A lean man with a narrow face and a long nose, dressed in filthy silver robes torn short at the sleeves and hem, staggered in through the door. It was the Bey's archsorcerer. Kuikin did not know him well, had only encountered him twice before. But he was a glutton for power and a gourmand of the profane.

He fell to his knees. "My gaud, you've forsaken me! You did not wait!"

"No, I felt your spark and it was enough to aid me," the gaud said, his voice grown stronger. "But our enemies outran you."

The archsorcerer looked across the room and saw them for the first time. He stared longest at Kuikin, as if trying to see past the beard. Then he turned and left.

Wings trembled, closed, and spread, the glistening wetness drying to brilliant shades of red and orange and yellow.

"Kuikin," whispered Renn.

A ball of broken tile formed and smashed into her back.

As she staggered, the gaud said, "Be silent or the next one shall stop your mouth."

Kuikin exchanged glances with the other two. A quick resort to force usually signaled weakness over strength.

Of course, weakness was a comparative term.

The gaud stared straight at him and made a clicking noise that might have been laughter.

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The archsorcerer returned with the soldiers, berating them for cowardice as he drove them into the Temple. There were maybe half the original number, most bruised and bandaged.

Two of them held one of the honey climbers, stripped and bound. His jaw was set, but his eyes widened in dismay at the sight of the gaud. "Over there," said the archsorcerer, and they threw him forward onto his stomach and retreated.

The gaud dropped from the ceiling, flapped its wings twice, and landed on the prisoner. A brief struggle ended when the gaud thrust his straw into the man's neck and began sucking.

The flagstones trembled on their ends in pleasure as the gaud's tongue flicked at the corner of his diminished mouth. "Strip and search them. Bind them if they give you any trouble."

Kuikin shucked his clothes at once. Vertir followed a moment later, unknotting the wraps that bound his wounded arm, still cradling it close to his body after he pulled his shirt off. His left shoulder looked slightly concave, still wrong.

The soldiers poked their spears at Renn over the wall of flagstones before she started. They mocked her as the first layer came off. On her undergarments she had painted the words of the death prayer in indelible ink, a custom done only by those going off to die.

"If she's in that much of a hurry, we can help her along."

"No, no, make her wait," another said.

Men who had suffered were too eager to share their suffering with others, Kuikin thought. He breathed a sigh of relief when she removed those garments too.

While the soldiers insulted her again, one pointed his spear at Vertir's wrist. "Take off the bracelet."

"No."

The soldier slipped the point of the blade under the bracelet. "If you take off the bracelet, I won't hurt — "

Vertir grabbed that shaft one-handed and yanked the man forward as he kicked the flagstones over. A crunch of broken bone coincided with the crack of the shaft on the man's head.

"No compromises," he said, just loud enough for Renn and Kuikin.

Then the others surrounded him. He spun the shaft, deflecting their

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thrusts until the stones jumped back up and the spear flew out of his hand to clatter against the wall.

"He will be amusing," the gaud said. "Leave him."

The soldiers stepped back, closer to the exit than the gaud. Loathing and terror deformed their features as they clustered together.

The gaud rose, stretched its wings, and addressed the archsorcerer. "I can feel the longing in you."

Didn't need sorcery for that, thought Kuikin. Longing was written on the man's face as clear as a lease for rented property.

"Yes," he said. "You are what I wish to be!"

"The divine already resides within you," the gaud said. "Unleash it and you too can have power without limit, life without end."

Both were lies: Kuikin wondered whether he should point out the fate of Bahl-the-Gaud. That life certainly ended.

"Yes, yes," the archsorcerer said. "That is what I want, what I have prepared for. The holy age will soon return, when men shall be ruled by their betters. We'll build new monuments to outlast their meager lives."

"You must first lose your humanity to gain divinity."

The archsorcerer straightened, lifting his chin. His eyes glittered like gems. "I accept that. I accept Transfiguration."

The gaud's needle slipped out of the corpse and flexed toward the shabby archsorcerer. "Good. I will enjoy your company. I will need you, no doubt, even before you are ready. We have a world to recreate in our own image."

His large eyes bulging in concentration, the gaud folded his wings and tensed. His four top legs twitched.

The archsorcerer's lean face took on an aspect of rapture that rapidly transformed into an ecstasy of pain. He began to moan and writhe, tearing off his robe in agony. His arms atrophied before their eyes, shrinking back into his swelling body until only his fingers protruded from the stumps of his shoulders.

The soldiers shifted uneasily. A couple at the rear eased toward the arched doorway.

The archsorcerer toppled onto his stomach. He twisted, howling, "No, no, I take it back," but the words were garbled in his throat and the gaud only laughed in reply. Then ribs burst through the archsorcerer's

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skin, which healed behind them. His legs shriveled, suddenly melting together.

One of the soldiers retched; another sagged against the wall, weeping. The gaud began to cackle now. "Yes, that's what it was like for me, too, but you'll forget it soon enough."

The air held the tang of lightning, setting Kuikin's teeth on edge. He bit down hard to hold the bile in his throat. Vertir's expression had gone blank, but his eyes darted from the soldiers' weapons to the gaud. Revulsion marred Renn's face. She averted her head, chin trembling.

No, she was pointing.

The flagstones wobbled unsteadily. The new gaud was still weak in his powers.

The agonizing screams of the transfigured man filled the temple. He squirmed across the floor. The fingers in his arm had become a set of tiny legs, the ribs another, and his feet a pair of hooks at the end of a long and narrow tail. His head still bore a human resemblance, a countenance like his own, but the mouth had widened and it seemed to be all teeth.

He looped around on himself, chasing his own tail, then leaped across the floor, mouth gnashing, in the direction of the soldiers. They broke and fled the chamber.

This creature, for he was no longer a man in any sense, reared up and, noticing the soldier Vertir had downed, cast itself upon him. The man was only unconscious, not dead, and he awoke as soon as the creature's teeth sank into his flesh. But his leg was broken and, unable to run, he screamed piteously while the creature dragged him off into a shadowed corner.

The gaud's laughter faded. "I'm hungry."

Needle-nose lifted, he sniffed them. He glanced away from Vertir as though he were dangerous, compared the size of Kuikin and Renn, then noticed a smear of blood on her bare thigh. The tip of the needle dilated.

"You were wearing the death prayer, were you not?"

She said nothing, but her shoulders squared.

The scent of bad weather intensified. He beckoned her. The stones in front of her dropped, the one behind flipped forward, nipping at her heels. She stepped forward, ahead of it, reluctantly.

"My death, at least, will be a true death," she said, "and my reincarnation a true one."

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The gaud faced her, bending back on his two hind legs and beating his wings. "Don't quote your superstitions at me."

Over in the corner, the soldier's screams ceased.

She dragged her feet, quailing as she had before the Abbess, fidgeting with the end of her braid.

Kuikin tried to stall. "Enlighten us, then!"

The gaud ignored him, hopping half the distance to Renn.

"If those who pass through death without death, who are reincarnated in a new form without first dying, do not cast themselves off the wheel of life to be consumed by the dragon's fire, then what happens to them when they die?"

The gaud turned his head to sneer. "We live forever. Come back in your next life and ask me about it."

Another flap of his wings hurled him toward Renn.

Vertir crouched to spring.

But she withdrew the hiltless blade of the poinard hidden in her braid and pinned it through the gaud's heart as he lighted.

She screamed and thrust forward.

The gaud squealed, tried to push her back with his four tiny upper limbs, and then, as she lifted him off the ground, with all six. His wings beat at her in a shower of sunset-colored dust. The flagstone pen surrounding Kuikin and Vertir wobbled.

Renn held on, pushing him back all the way to the wall, twisting the blade and screaming, her voice merging with the shrill whine of the gaud, whose six legs embraced her, pulled her tight as his wings unfolded, vibrating so hard against the stone that they buzzed.

"No!" Kuikin shouted, meaning yes!

A blue fire rippled up the blade and into her arms. She yelped and fell backward, dead. The injured gaud slid down the wall, poinard protruding from his chest, and crumpled to the ground. A second, brighter flash of light and the wings stopped. Fire bolted out of the gaud into the ground; a burning smell pervaded the room. The flagstone wall toppled.

The creature in the shadows began an awful keening.

"Forever," gasped the gaud, "was so very brief."

Kuikin bolted forward, realizing as he did so that the gaud did not move, that Renn had spoken those words and not the gaud. She rolled over,

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face sheeted white beneath the jaundiced and vermillion dust, knees and elbows folded tight. She was alive! He froze where he stood.

Vertir scooped her up by the arm, dragging her stumbling to her feet, and hurried them all toward the door.

As the three rushed outside, the whole ridge began to shake, whipping sideways like the scaly tail of some giant beast. They staggered, trying to keep their feet. The ground swayed. A building somewhere off in the dead city tumbled, crashed. They ran past the corpses of the Bey's soldiers, pierced with darts from blowguns.

"Down the cliff?" Vertir asked.

Renn shook her head. "My hands — numb — can't feel."

"The leap?"

"No!" said Kuikin.

"We'll take our chances in the trees then."

Kuikin followed after them, numb throughout his entire body. He couldn't believe that she still lived.

Knotted vines dropped down in front of them as the ground tremored again, more vigorously. The trees wobbled, vines quivering. Above them, honey climbers shouted, "Up you, up you!"

Kuikin looked up, saw them perched on branches rocking back and forth like the mast of a ship in a rough sea, and the vertigo immobilized him. He was safer on the ground.

"Hold on tight," Vertir told Renn, switching hands. He wrapped the vine around his forearm and gripped her with his left arm as the climbers pulled them up hand over hand.

Only a few feet from the ground, he grunted and Renn slipped out of his grasp. With his injured shoulder, he couldn't hold onto her. Kuikin rushed to her, hugging her tightly to him, squeezing a fistful of flesh.

"Just leave me," she said.

"Not this time."

He grasped the vine and held on in blind terror until hands gripped him and pulled him aboard a feeble platform of woven branches high above the ground. He crawled to the middle, clutching to it tightly as it swayed, his stomach reeling.

Voices around him shouted, fingers pointed.

From his perch, he could see through the branches to the edge of the

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city and the river below. A piece of the wall containing the condemned man's leap broke off from the cliff and plummeted into the water. Another section of cliff calved free, and, trailing pieces of buildings from the dead city, plunged into the pool, drowning the valley in a deluge of water.

One of the honey climbers turned to them. Kuikin thought he might have been the one from Finis Opor. He looked at the gill marks scarring the climber's torso and realized that here was an entire people who'd been offered Transfiguration, and had ultimately refused it.

"Man," the climber said, tapping his chest, "in go to city."

"He dead," Renn said. "Dead clean. Dead true."

Some of the other climbers let out their breath at this, but the interrogator asked, "Big magic man, in go to city, long back."

"Dead, he dead," Renn said. "In go to dragon flame."

While he considered this, the ground rumbled again. He pointed the way out of the valley. "Nothing take you?"

"Nothing take we," Renn agreed. "Nothing, valley go."

He turned away, talking to men who went off toward the dead city. But apparently her answers satisfied him. A climber crossed over from another tree, carrying a section of giant comb on his back. A grail-sized chunk was broken off and handed to each of them. Vertir lifted his and sang:

"Honey is sweet when it's fresh from the comb,
But nothing is sweeter
Than a road leading home."

Crawling over to Renn, Kuikin lifted a section of the giant honeycomb to her lips. "I'm glad you're — " He faltered. "That was easier than I — "

A human-sized creature thrashed through the underbrush below them, keening like a lost soul. Even as they twisted their heads to look, it fell silent and disappeared.

Renn licked at the honey, raised her burn-scarred arm, and unfolded the fist into an open hand. "Murder has always been easy, Kuikin. It's the path of righteous peace that's hard."

"You had to — everyone strays from the path — "

"Don't say anything." She hung her head in shame.

They watched from the platform as the world below them fell away.

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CURIOSITIES

LEGAL DAISY SPACING, BY CHRIS WINN (1985)

SECTION 42B of the Floral Disobedience Act plainly states that daisies must be 25.5mm apart — no more, no less. Snowflakes must conform with Registered Snowflake Design # 65537f (mid-gray). You'd know that if you had a copy of Chris Winn's 1985 book, *Legal Daisy Spacing*.

Not that that's all it covers. Nothing less than a manual of world improvements issued by the Build-A-Planet program, it gives directions on how to discipline barbaric deciduous trees, bottle tornadoes, bleach overly colorful rainbows, and deal with those nasty Bipedal Growths.

Winn is primarily an advertising illustrator, but his imagination runs pretty wild throughout the book. Nearly every other page has a drawing showing volcanoes being freshened, or parish churches being compressed.

So, why a book about this subject? The easy answer is that it's a comment on environmental issues, what with instructions for oiling shorelines and such, but *Legal Daisy Spacing* goes so far over the edge that easy answers are suspect. Madness is what it is; the madness, perhaps, of an advertising illustrator who just has to let go from time to time and do something really bizarre.

That, at least, is the result, regardless of the intent. It's a delightfully twisted little book that begs to be read aloud, especially at parties, and that also teaches us the importance of Build-A-Planet's motto, "Order Through Vigilance, Decency Through Purification."

There's even a handy, bound-in ruler to help you comply with Section 42b.

— Bud Webster

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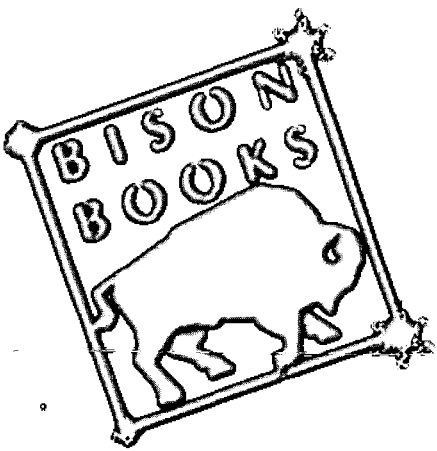

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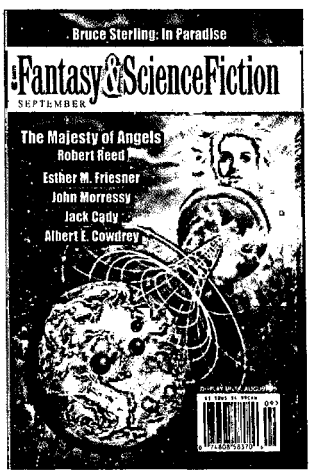

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